2 Could There Be a Complete Explanation of Everything?

Timothy O’Connor

One need only shut oneself in a closet and begin to think of the fact of one’s being there, of one’s queer bodily shape in the darkness . . . of one’s fantastic character and all, to have the wonder steal over the detail as much as over the general fact of being, and to see that it is only familiarity that blunts it. Not only that anything should be, but that this very thing should be, is mysterious.

—W. James, Some Problems of Philosophy (1911)

The world is a complicated place. The naked human eye reveals many kinds of things, animate and inanimate. Natural science, and especially fundamental science, brings some unity to the blooming and buzzing confusion of ordinary observation. But it still involves a lot of particular detail—the specific mass and charge of electrons, for example, the number of them, and the size and structure of spacetime and lots of other things. Whichever way you look at it, it doesn’t seem to be necessary that things be this way. I might have been a roofer like my father instead of a philosopher, and there might have been ‘schmecrons’ instead of electrons as among the basic building blocks of physical reality. There seems to be no end to the ways things might have been, as opposed to the one complete way that things are (including the past and future). Philosophers express this by saying that most things about the world seem contingent—such that they might have been otherwise—rather than necessary—such that things had to be that way. Science is about the business of trying to explain how things actually are, at a deep level, and how they behave; that is, it proposes and ever refines accounts of the world’s structure and dynamics. However, there can seem to be something necessarily left over, something left unaccounted for, in principle, by our best theories: the fact that things in general are as they are: that there happens to be a world of the sort that we find and that science aims to better understand.

Is contingent existence a proper target for explanation? If so, what kind of constraints might there be on an acceptable explanation? There undeniably is a powerful impetus in us to ask the question ‘Why is there this?—why, indeed, is there anything at all?’ Yet a little reflection shows that a satisfactory answer to this question would require an altogether different kind of explanation from familiar sorts. Would any sort manage to do? If so, would more than one?

Long dismissed by philosophers in the grip of various empiricist doctrines concerning meaning or explanation, these questions have begun to attract renewed attention, and I hope in what follows to advance this recent discussion. My aims are modest. I begin by reminding most of us (and perhaps informing a few of us) of the simple and compelling reasons for thinking that an explanation of contingent existence itself is something that empirical science cannot aspire to. I will then bring out some key assumptions concerning modal truth (and knowledge) and causation that underlie either the question concerning the explanation of contingent existence or certain attempts to provide a constructive response to it, and I will situate these assumptions in the context of recent philosophical developments. I find these assumptions to be plausible, but here I will only be able to gesture at the reasons I have for accepting them. That any interesting metaphysical thesis will require contentious assumptions should go without saying. However, discussions with many philosophers have made me aware that some are prone to applying a double standard when it comes to this topic, given its deep roots within the history of natural theology. Many past thinkers have made inflated claims to offer ‘proofs’ of this or that constructive natural theological thesis. Nearly all contemporary philosophers rightly deny that ‘proof’ or ‘certainty’ can be attained for such claims. Yet some appear to believe that this fact shows that constructive projects in this area—or at least nonnaturalistic constructive projects—cannot be profitably pursued. Where this skepticism is applied across the board to all claims or theories in metaphysics generally, it at least has the virtue of consistency. I shall offer no general defense of metaphysics here, though I note that in recent decades it has been a thriving area of philosophical inquiry. In any case, the reader is encouraged to apply appropriate epistemic standards to the present inquiry, just as I take care to note my contentious assumptions and be careful in the conclusions that I draw from them. With my assumptions spelled out, I turn to my central argumentative burden: rebutting a common objection to the enterprise of seeking an explanation of contingent reality, viz., that the enterprise is bankrupt since contingent reality, by definition as it were, precludes the possibility of

complete explanation. I also respond to the typical fallback objection that the enterprise is animated by an implausibly strong form of rationalism.

My goal, then, is to help get the question of existence itself back on the table of serious philosophical discussion, by showing how it falls naturally out of an attractive (if, inevitably, contentious) metaphysical orientation, making plausible that its resolution must be nonnaturalistic, and arguing that the choice between a thoroughgoing necessitarian picture and one involving 'brutely' inexplicable facts is a false one: we can have both contingency and complete explanation. I argue this last point through reflection on a broadly theistic metaphysics. If my contention is correct, it is worth considering what other metaphysical schemes might likewise be consistent with complete explanation of contingency. I argued in O'Connor (2008) that a theistic form of such explanation is to be preferred to alternatives that I can presently envision, but I neither assume nor conclude that here. I will be delighted, in fact, if the present modest contribution to the growing body of serious reflection on the question of contingent existence occasioned further development and more powerful defense of nontheistic theories of the *fons et origo* of existence, unshackled from empiricist handcuffs. The possibilities for explaining contingent existence have been underexplored in contemporary metaphysics. This was inevitable, as real progress has required development on a number of ancillary fronts. The time is now ripe.

1 COMPLETE EXPLANATION IS NOT TO BE FOUND IN EMPIRICAL SCIENCE

Complete explanation of contingent reality—the sum total of all the existing objects and their histories that might not have been—would be explanation that involves no brute givens and leaves no explanatory loose ends whatsoever. It would be such that one could not intelligibly ask for anything more. All true, more limited explanations would rest on something that not only has no further explanation but can have no further explanation. I will argue that no foundational physical theory could aspire to explanation of this sort by considering in broad outline three main ways that one might try to pull it off, showing why those ways cannot succeed, and suggesting that the lesson generalizes.

Consider first the *Way of Eternity*: the attempt to provide an adequate theory on which physical reality had no beginning (whether of finite or infinite temporal measure); every temporal stage is fixed by what has gone before; and the totality of physical reality is just the sum of the stages. The *Way of Eternity* is instantiated by a generalized Newtonian theory of infinite space and time, by contemporary physicist John Wheeler's theory of oscillating universes, or by any theory on which our universe is generated by a primordial 'universe generator', itself eternal or spawned by a sequence of structures that has no beginning.

Second, there is the *Way of Unification*: the attempt successively to reduce physical theory's number of fundamental properties and property bearers, and the laws governing their co-evolution through spacetime. This way's theoretical limit is a single simple equation governing the distribution of a single fundamental entity—realizing physicist Steven Weinberg's dream of an equation that our descendants might display on their T-shirts. With maximal unification, it suggests, comes maximal explicable.

Finally, the *Way of Plenitude*: the attempt to provide complete explanation not by bowing down to simple foundations or pushing back in beginningless time but by spreading out. Satisfyingly complete explanation may be achieved, it is claimed, through the devising of an elegant and empirically adequate theory that locates our universe within a vast structure of totalities that exhibits completely nonarbitrary properties. This might be a plenum of disjoint island universes or of causally noninteracting, n-dimensional spacetimes embedded within a single hyperspace of $n + 1$ dimensions. This way's limit case involves the existence of all mathematically consistent totalities: all possible universes, including every hyperspace configuration, as Massachusetts Institute of Technology physicist (and closet metaphysician) Max Tegmark (2008) proposes.

One might go further and combine *Eternity* and *Unification*, though neither seems to square with *Plenitude*, as universes that have a beginning or are less than ideally unified would seem to be part of any robust plenitude.

Suppose first that some version of the *Way of Eternity* were correct. Some have thought that, if this were so, there would be nothing left unexplained (that is, *unexplainable* in principle). David Hume, for example, in his * Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, contends that a beginningless sequence of events may admit of a complete, purely internal explanation—even if each of its constituent objects is a contingent being, such that it might not have existed. All that is needed is that each stage of the sequence has a causal explanation in terms of what preceded it.

That there can be immanent, stepwise explanations for particular events in terms of prior causes is hardly news. The crucial claim here is that the aggregation of explanations of this kind can be *complete*, leaving nothing further to be explained. This claim is plainly mistaken. A complete explanation would be *unconditional*—it would not appeal to factors that are themselves left unexplained. This requirement evidently is not met for local, sequential explanations where one event is explained in terms of another that itself is an unexplained given in terms of the explanation at hand. (This is not to say that there is anything wrong with conditional scientific explanations. I am merely pointing out that such explanations do not *aspire* to what would be required for Hume's contention to go through.) The point generalizes to other forms of scientific explanation familiar from contemporary theorizing. Explanations of the unfolding of cosmic history that point to the universe's earliest conditions plus its fundamental dynamical patterns.
treat these latter facts as simply given. Explanations cannot be unconditional if the terms are themselves all contingent, such that they might have not occurred.

Alex Pruss (2006: 44) gives the following nice example that illustrates the essential explanatory incompleteness of simply noting the stepwise dependence within a beginningless sequence of events. Suppose a cannon is fired at time \( t_0 \) and the cannonball lands at \( t_1 \). Now consider the infinite sequence of momentary events spanning all times between the two events, excluding \( t_0 \) and including \( t_1 \). There is no first event in this sequence, as there is no first temporal instant after \( t_0 \). (Time, we assume, is continuous like the real numbers, rather than discrete like the integers.) Thus, though the entire sequence has a finite duration, it still meets Hume’s envisioned scenario of a beginningless infinite sequence of events, each causally dependent on events that precede it. Hume should conclude that this series is explanatorily complete, but this is evidently false: the entire sequence of events has a partial explanation in terms of an event external to it—the firing of the cannon at \( t_0 \).

One might object that in the scenario Hume envisions, in which the infinite sequence constituting the universe’s history also has infinite temporal duration, there is reason to think that explanation is complete: unlike in the temporally finite sequence involving the cannonball, there could not be an event temporally prior to the temporally infinite sequence that might play an explanatory role in relation to it. This in turn suggests that there is no room for an explanation of \( t_1 \), which is a pretty good reason to conclude that it is explanatorily complete. However, this response makes a big assumption that is unmotivated, viz., that there cannot be either atemporal or synchronic causal explanations. It seems possible that there is a causal agent or condition outside the infinite sequence but not temporally anterior to it that is either always or timelessly giving being to the series.

There is reason, then, to suppose that further explanation is possible even in the case of a universe of infinite temporal duration. If so, and if our universe truly is contingent, the obtaining of some fundamental facts or other will be unexplained within empirical theory, whatever the topological structure of contingent reality. An infinite regress of beings in or outside the spatiotemporal universe cannot forecast such a result.

We might hope to be able to conjoin Eternity with the Way of Unification. But, even supposing an eternal physical reality that is maximally simple at the fundamental level in terms of its ontology, dynamics, and topological structure, complete explanation would still elude our grasp. A cooperatively simple world reduces the number of contingent facts needing independent explanation. But in the end, what we get is conditional in character. The most fundamental fact of existence itself is left unexplained.

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common in the empiricist tradition, the many empiricist attempts to excise or deflate any lurking appeal to more-than-verbal necessity in empirical explanations have failed, I think it's fair to say, and resounding enough as to suggest that the attempt is futile. Philosophical and empirical explanations alike often (and legitimately) depend on reality's being characterizable by a rich structure of truths taken as necessary. We might call such truths 'opaque necessities': propositions that we accept for explanatory reasons, not because they are 'transparent' or self-evident in the way that basic logical axioms allegedly are. Indeed, it can plausibly be argued that opaque necessities are implicit in logic and mathematics themselves, in the forms of essentialism commitments concerning propositional entities (see O'Connor [2008: ch. 1]). More readily apparent is that there are opaque necessities concerning causation, natural kinds, and basic normative claims concerning what may constitute objective evidence for what. (Consider the vicious circle one would find oneself in if one supposed that the canons of inductive reasoning were not necessary but contingent, and so themselves stand in need of empirical support.)

More needs to be said than can be said here to develop a general modal epistemology that doesn't rely on the hypernaturalist notion of 'direct seeing' the truth of certain basic modal claims. Consistent with a number of recent thinkers, I believe that we should think instead in terms of a fallibilist procedure that seeks to bring into reflective equilibrium the results of our continuously developing formal disciplines and the considered modal commitments that arise out of scientific and metaphysical theories.

That the metaphysician likewise appeals to this primitive feature of necessity in attempting to provide a form of explanation of that most general fact of existence itself, then, should not be ruled out of bounds absent some compelling, specific reason to think that necessity cannot characterize any existing entity. And note that necessary mathematical truths are often taken to be entities—propositions—that exist of necessity with the property of truth. (We might follow Leibniz and streamline our ontology by taking them instead to be necessary divine ideas, but that route is obviously of no help to the would-be deflater of necessary existence.)

I noted above that there is one prominent, constructive response to the question of contingent existence that does not (or at least need not) posit the existence of a necessarily existing being. According to John Leslie, the world exists because it should. There are Platonic facts about the existence of some things and the absence of others being ethically required. These facts, says Leslie, are not existing things such as agents, but they are realities. The existence of our world is objectively better than nothing, and also better than many on-the-whole-bad worlds. Leslie posits that facts about what is ethically required can be creative without any agent, arguing that only in this way can the contingent-existence question be adequately answered.

Derek Parfit (1998) accepts the formal adequacy of Leslie's approach but holds that there are still other possibilities (although he refrains from endorsing any particular one). Here are some important 'global possibilities': this universe alone exists; every conceivable universe exists; no universe exists; the best possible universe exists; all universes above some threshold of overall goodness exist. Each of these possibilities, he claims, could obtain for no reason. It could be just a coincidence, for example, that the best possible universe alone exists. So the Random Hypothesis is that whatever global possibility obtains, even if an 'interesting' one, its obtaining has no explanation. Nonrandom Hypotheses, by contrast, claim that there is a Selector, a feature had by the actual global possibility, such that its obtaining is no coincidence—it is explained by some true principle. So, for example, if the best global possibility is one having our universe alone, and that is what obtains, the hypothesis will be that this possibility obtains because it is best. (Or it might be that the best possibility has all universes that are on-balance good, and that is what obtains.) While it could have obtained for no reason, it is more plausible to suppose that it obtains just because it is best. Supposing this to be a coincidence, says our hypothesizer, would be unreasonable.

Here I can only confess that I am not able to make sense of the form of explanation considered by Leslie and Parfit. What sort of 'because' is involved in asserting that a global possibility obtains because $P$, for some nonagential principle $P$? Evidently, it is not causal in the efficient-causal sense. (If it were, we should go on to ask about the nature of this peculiar causal entity. In particular, we can ask whether it is a necessary being and whether its causality is structurally analogous to nonpersonal causal agents in the universe. It will not do to ward off further inquiries by saying it is an 'abstract' entity.) But if the explanation is not causal, we are left with a truth without an ontological foundation—and not just any old truth but the most fundamental truth of all. That does not seem like an illuminating explanation at all.

That said, I am not claiming here to have conclusively rebutted the principle-based approach, just indicating the kind of reason that I judge to be compelling and that warrants discussion by its proponents. In Parfit's

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3. For development of this point, see Wright (1986 and 1980: 415–20). Famously, Quine [1961] argued for epistemological holism on which even logical and basic epistemic norms are subject to the 'tribunal of experience'. But as Quine recognized, the choice of whether and how to modify such commitments to 'accommodate recalcitrant data' will inevitably be pragmatic, rather than epistemically objective. I assume that most of my readers will agree with me that there lies shipwreck.


case, at least, it is pretty clear that he prefers the principle-based approach to one that appeals to necessary being because he embraces a view of absolute possibility as encompassing whatever is 'fully conceivable', or perhaps ideally conceivable. (Since it is fully conceivable in the intended sense that there is no necessary being, alleged opaque necessities get us nowhere, as any such truth will itself be a brute contingency from a higher vantage point.) As I have taken pains to emphasize, I am here assuming that this contention is false. If one accepts this assumption, one may have to work a little harder to motivate the principle-based approach than its recent defenders have done.

3 THE IRREDUCIBILITY OF CAUSATION AND THE NATURE OF INDETERMINISTIC PROPENSITIES

Explanations of the most fundamental sort are often causal, and one sort of causal explanation will feature prominently in the discussion to follow. As with modality, the nature of causation is itself a large and much disputed topic. Here I will have to assume the truth of a general approach to the nature of causation (which I discussed in O’Connor [2008] and elsewhere). I maintain that reductionist accounts of causation, including variants on the influential neo-Humean counterfactual theory proposed by David Lewis, are one and all untenable, for quite general reasons. Reductionist theories purport to analyze causal facts entirely in terms of the noncausal facts, so that causation is not a metaphysically basic feature of the world but instead is wholly derivative. Though popular throughout the metaphysics-paragraping twentieth century, the reductionist program has consisted in the advancement of one implausible and extensionally inadequate proposal after another. It’s time to call it quits. The alternative that I favor is (loosely speaking) neo-Aristotelian. The details of differing versions of this approach are not important in what follows, All I will assume is the ecumenical core, on which fundamental intrinsic properties

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7. As Lewis thinks of it, causal facts and the laws of nature are reducible to facts concerning the global spatiotemporal arrangement of fundamental natural properties, which we allegedly may conceive in nondispositional terms. Roughly, the laws are the best system of generalizations over such natural facts, where bestness is determined by the optimal balance of simplicity and strength (or explanatory power). Causation in turn consists in a restricted kind of counterfactual dependence of one event on another, where the counterfactuals are grounded in cross-world similarities. See the Introduction to Lewis (1986b).

8. I also deem inadequate the novel nonreductionist account developed by David Armstrong (1997) and Michael Tooley (1987), on which causation is a specific higher-order relation among universals. To my mind, this view is neo-Humeanism in disguise, one that simply adds ornamental second-order structure to a cause-less manifold, gaining nothing in explanatory power. (For discussion, see O’Connor [2008: ch. 2], itself building on criticisms by Lewis [1986b] and van Fraassen [1988].)

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4 EXPLANATIONS AND EXPLANATION SCHEMAS

If the two sets of assumptions concerning the legitimate role of ‘opaque’ necessities in some forms of explanation and the irreducible, productive character of causation are granted, how should one proceed in constructing and evaluating possible answers to the ‘existence question’? A good place

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9. A number of recent authors have defended versions of this general approach. See, for example, Ellis (2001), Molnar (2003), Bird (2007), and Jacobs (2011).
to start is to distinguish between explanations, properly speaking, and explanation schemas that specify a mere broad outline of the causally relevant features of a putative cause and its manner of operation. The distinction drawn, we should recognize that we could have reason to endorse an explanation schema even in the absence of an explanation that fills in the missing details if the schema seems to provide the only, or the best, form of answer, as measured by material adequacy and other standards of theory comparison. (Note that evolutionary theory offers, for many historical events, only an explanatory schema—though a quite rich one, to be sure. It entails that there are true, detailed explanations of a certain type for ever so many specific facts about biological history, most of which are unavailable to us in any detail.)

Consider the hypothesis that the totality that is the physical universe is metaphysically contingent while being a timeless causal product of a being that exists of absolute necessity. This is not much of a possible explanation of the universe, since it tells us nothing about the manner by which and the circumstances in which the necessary being gave rise to it. We might give the claim a little more specificity: the necessary being blindly and inevitably 'emanated' the universe of necessity (in which case the universe itself turns out to be derivatively necessary, though not necessarily from itself). Alternatively, we could suppose that the necessary being generated the universe through an internal, indeterministic mechanism, capable of generating any of a vast array of possibilities. As it happened, it gave rise to this one, but it needn't have done so. Third, we might say instead that the necessary being is a personal agent whose actions are guided by purposes. It caused the universe in accordance with some goal or set of goals. This option subdivides into two possibilities: on the first, the totality of its goals and beliefs rendered it inevitable that it would give rise to a universe of just this sort, which perfectly reflects those goals (so thought Leibniz). On the second, the reasons were resistible. It might have chosen a different sort of universe, holding fixed its actual goals and beliefs. (This accords with the more common theistic view.) While these explanatory schema are more informative than the initial barebones thesis, they are still far from full explanations. They tell us very little about the nature of the necessary being or its manner of activity. And there are other, similarly sketchy possibilities besides. We could, e.g., try to follow Einstein and his hero Spinoza in thinking that, appearances to the contrary, the universe itself is a self-contained wholly necessary being, down to the last, most contingent-seeming fact. (As Spinoza would say, the appearance of contingency here is a result of our ignorance of the totality of causes.) Or we might enrich the Way of Plenitude with the metaphysical (not empirical) thesis that the existence of the multiverse is itself necessary.10

5 COMPLETE EXPLANATION AND INDETERMINISM: MODAL COLLAPSE OR BRUTE FACTS?

Perhaps the fundamental objection to the project of seeking a satisfactory explanation schema for contingent existence takes the form of a dilemma: either we (implausibly) embrace ‘modal collapse’ and suppose that, in the final analysis, nothing is contingent and ‘all is necessity’; or we concede the existence of ‘brute’, wholly inexplicable contingency somewhere or other and so give up on the possibility of complete or ultimate explanation. The objectors reason as follows: if there truly is a sufficient reason for every truth, a reason why it is so and not otherwise, then every truth will be a necessary truth, because a direct consequence of the fully explicable (and hence necessary) activity or choice of a necessary being. If not, if there is at some point a merely contingent link between necessary being and contingent being, so that this contingent world might not have existed, even given the existence and nature of a necessary being, then we’ve after all conceded that some contingent truths are ‘brute facts’, lacking complete explanation.

10. We must distinguish this proposal—on which there are an infinite number of universes, each of which exists necessarily in virtue of having a primitive property of necessity—from David Lewis’s (1986a) notorious reduction of modality to nonmodal facts concerning concrete ‘possible worlds’. I have here assumed that all varieties of modal reductionism are false. For my assessment of Lewis’s account, see O’Connor (2008: ch. 1). Lewis professed to be ‘inured to brute contingency’ and recognized that given his metaphysics, explanation ‘inevitably terminate[s] in brute matter of fact’ (1986a: 129).

11. For an engrossing discussion of structure in metaphysics, see Sider (2011).
Could There Be a Complete Explanation

Principle of Contingent Explanation (PCE) I

The existence of every contingent basic individual (and arbitrary collections thereof) and the occurrence of every concrete event in or among such individuals have true minimum-grade causal explanations, ones that cite the activation of a dispositional tendency (possibly indeterministic) in a distinct entity or entities.

One example of a metaphysics that is consistent with the principle in its full generality without entailing modal collapse is classical theism. This yields the following schematic explanation of the entire realm of contingently existing entities: (i) the totality of such entities and the events that they undergo are the causal product of a divine act of will or choice that is guided by some goal or reason; and (ii) this totality was chosen despite God's having either competing reasons to will a different outcome or attractive, alternative ways of achieving the very same goals that guided what was in fact willed.

If this explanation were correct, the existence of every natural particular and the events in which they participate admit, in principle, of a fully adequate explanation in terms ultimately involving their causal dependency on a necessary being, whose activity was guided but not determined by some goal[s] that the actual order of things were seen to satisfy. Which is to say, there is an account of why there is anything at all and why the natural order has the character it has. And note further that by understanding schematically the purposive and free nature and characteristic activity of the being on whom all possibilities and actualities ultimately depend, we might see, too, why these

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13. As Peter Lipton (1990) made clear, a request for a contrastive explanation ('Why P rather than Q?') presumes that there is an explanatory relationship between fact [P] and 'not' (not-Q); it presumes that the occurrence of P and the nonoccurrence of Q can be given a unifying explanation. But this assumption plainly will not hold for every such pairing given in a deterministic world—as when the occurrence of P and the absence of Q are completely unrelated matters. In an indeterministic world, contrastive explanation will also fail (plausibly) wherever P and Q are mutually exclusive and each had a significant, nonzero chance of occurring.

14. Objection: In that case, whatever aspect of the divine nature explains the actual outcome must be truly contingent. Game over. Reply: Not so. A necessarily existing divine being would necessarily have a range of creative motivations or goals that point toward different options. For simplicity, say there are two options A and B, such that A is motivated by the state of God's having reason Rg and B is motivated by God's having reason Rh. In the actual world, God chooses A. This is explained by Rh, a necessary part of the divine nature. Similarly, had God chosen B, it would have been explained by God's having Rg, a state that God also has necessarily. The fact that one or the other of these states is explanatory of the divine action only contingently (since the action itself might not have occurred) does not imply that the existence of these states is contingent.

15. As Eleonore Stump has reminded me, the ultimacy of explanation on this metaphysics requires the (standard) assumption that the divine being is constituted by a nature all of whose features are essentially interdependent. If this assumption were not made, then there would be an unexplainable and brute fact that this being's nature was contingently constituted by this particular set of properties. Famously, this sort of consideration led many medieval philosophical theologians to embrace a very strong doctrine of divine simplicity. I believe that this stronger assumption is resistible, but we need not consider this matter here. (See O'Connor 2008: ch. 6.)
dependent entries exist only contingently. (We would see, that is, that it is the very nature of a freely choosing agent, whether human or divine, to bring about effects that are not necessitated, and hence which are contingent.)

We would need to say more about this model of purposive agency in order to adequately defend its coherence. Here I will instead note that the more general point—there can be explanations that are not contrastive and do not entail the existence of contrastive explanations for their explananda—is a familiar fact outside the contentious matter of how to understand the will, whether divine or human: it is assumed in our best-confirmed scientific explanations, those given by quantum mechanics (at least on most interpretations). There, it is common to explain a phenomenon such as radioactive decay in terms of mechanisms that are presumed to operate indeterministically. The phenomenon is adequately explained by describing a mechanism that had a nonzero probability of producing that result in the circumstances and that did in fact produce it. This is so even though there is no explanation of why this result was produced rather than that one, whose probability of occurring was likewise nonzero. Here, too, we have an explanation of why there cannot be a correct contrastive explanation of the outcome, for every possible contrast. The very nature of an indeterministic causal agent precludes such explanations.

The contrast between a wholly uncaused ('brute') event and one that is indeterministically caused to occur is no less stark than that between a wholly uncaused event and a deterministically caused one. Indeterministic causal explanations are not an altogether different kettle of fish from deterministic explanations, as the mechanisms to which both sorts appeal are not deeply different in kind. Indeed, deterministic mechanisms are simply the limit cases of analogous probabilistic mechanisms arranged on a continuum ordered by the strength of their antecedent probability to cause the actual outcome. To put it in other terms, there is nothing partial or otherwise defective about indeterministic, noncontrastive explanations in stochastic physical theories—or, for that matter, in accounts of freely willed choices. Nothing pertaining to the target phenomena is left out of the explanatory picture: which events actually occur, how they actually are locally produced, and whether and why specific types of alternative events were possible, given the prior circumstances. Things don't go all mysterious just because some of our world's causes operate indeterministically.

In the envisioned theistic framework, which aspires to maximal comprehensiveness in our explanatory project, there are no brute contingencies—no unexplained or incompletely explained events—whatsoever. True, where contingency is preserved through the nonnecessitation of outcomes, there will be abstract, contrastive facts about those events that are not explicable. But this is just to say that the fully explicable events were not causally/metaphysically determined to occur. It is fully explicable why those contrastive facts do not admit specific explanation: the events they concern are the product of a causal agent or agents that operate indeterministically, an agent or agents whose existence admits of complete explanation. I submit that there is no explanatory surd in this scenario, nothing that seems to cry out for some kind of other explanation where there is none—as would be the case on the naturalist-empiricist view that physical reality is ultimate but without explanation of any sort.

The plausibility of the above explanatory principle rests on an ontology that draws a sharp distinction between concrete contingent events, consisting in one or more individuals instantiating one or more basic properties and relations, and the uncontrollable abundance of contingent facts those events make true. However, we may make the required distinction between brute and nonbrute truths without this particular ontology, while continuing to avoid modal collapse. It is embodied in the following alternative principle, implicit in some of my above remarks:

**Principle of Contingent Explanation (PCE) II**

For every contingent event or truth, either there is a true explanation of it or there is a vacuous true explanation why the event or truth has no true explanation.

Where an event is caused but not determined by a prior factor, there is no true explanation why that event occurred rather than some causally possible alternative (at least where the probability of the alternative is significant). That is so, however, is not mysteriously brute. It is fully explained by the indeterministic nature of the causal factor in question. This shows that seeking an explanation for contingent existence itself need be neither quixotic nor arbitrary. If contingent reality is causally grounded in a necessary being operating indeterministically, the PCE II will be satisfied. By contrast, were the totality of contingent existence to lack explanation altogether, as contemporary naturalists suppose, it will not be satisfied. There would be not only no explanation for this totality but also no substantial explanation that enabled us to see why it has no explanation: it would be objectionably brute.16

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16. And thus my reply to Newlands's insistence that 'in the absence of the general justification which the PSR so wonderfully provides, O' Connor must show why we should favor metaphysical outlooks which provide meaningful answers to the "Why anything contingent at all?" question in preference to those which answer with nothing but iterated bruteness' (2010: 439). The generality of PCE I and II also undercuts Della Rocca's (2010) argument that non-arbitrary commitment to popular and more limited explicability arguments requires acceptance of PSR.
6 NATURALISM, TRANSCENDENT NECESSARY BEING
EXPLANATIONS, SIMPLICITY, AND ECONOMY

In its barest form, the theistic explanatory schema for existence is this: the reason that any contingent thing exists at all (and, in particular, the world of which we are part) is that it is a contingent, causal, and intended consequence of an absolutely necessary being. Absent a powerful case for supposing that explanatory appeal to necessary being is illusory, it seems unreasonable, at least on the face of it, to allow that the question *Why this?* is a perfectly coherent one and that it correctly presupposes that the universe and everything therein need not have existed—that is to say, its existence is entirely contingent—and nonetheless hold that there is no answer to it; hold that the universe's existence is simply a brute, unexplainable fact. In practice, we would not countenance local contingent facts entirely lacking in causal antecedents, regardless of the length and thoroughness of failed attempts to generate plausible hypotheses. A difference of attitude when it comes to the most general of contingent facts seems arbitrary. It seems even more unreasonable to deny that, other things being fairly equal, given two metaphysics such that one of them is consistent with there being an ultimate, nonarbitrary explanation of existence while the other precludes such explanation, we should prefer the one that answers it on account of its greater explanatory power.

Tom Senor suggests that this stance begs the question against theism's chief rival—'brute naturalism', on which the existence of the universe is a brute fact.17 Explanatory power is a theoretical virtue only when dealing with a phenomenon that clearly has some explanation. But the bare existence of the universe just isn't one of those facts that cry out for explanation (even if, as Senor himself supposes, it in fact has an explanation).

In reply, I don't see how we might make a principled, let alone plausible, distinction between facts that do and facts that don't cry out for explanation of any sort whatsoever. I don't see this distinction at work in any ordinary explanatory context, steering us away from so much as contemplating the possibility of explanations for certain facts among others (the explanation-worthy ones) within a domain. Certainly, all manner of practical considerations partly determine which facts a theorist might sensibly hope to explain at a given stage of inquiry. And fruitful theories frame inquiry in ways that allow certain kinds of facts front and center while folding others into the theoretical superstructure, rendering them impervious to substantive explanation from within the theory. In practice, there will always be limits of these kinds to human inquiry. But Senor, I take it, wants to claim something much stronger: certain contingent facts just are such in and of themselves as not to require causal explanation of any kind whatsoever (purposive or mechanistic,

deterministic or merely probabilistic, or even a nontrivial explanation of why they have no explanation). What does it take to be a fact like that? Time has not dealt kindly with Enlightenment suggestions on this score: modern cosmology is rife with attempted explanations of the universe we inhabit and facts concerning the nature of time and space. One suspects that the only way for a philosopher to delineate in advance the facts or facts that cry out to be ignored is this: whatever turn out to be the most basic facts of natural reality. That kind of special pleading is quite a comedown for the heirs of Hume and Kant.

It's important to see my appeal to greater explanatory power in setting aside brute naturalism in context. As noted earlier, Hume, Kant, and others have tried to argue that the idea of necessary (concrete) existence is incoherent and/or 'empty' (and so explanatorily useless), or that appeal to necessary existence to explain contingency leads to 'modal collapse', such that all is necessity. If either of these familiar contentions were correct, then we would indeed have a principled reason for thinking that explanation cannot be pushed through entirely, so that there must be brute (inexplicable) contingency somewhere or other. In the present discussion, I have assumed the falsity of the first of these contentions and argued against the second. If—but only if—my positions on these matters are well founded, and an explanation for contingent existence itself is a coherent theoretical possibility, then it does seem proper to prefer a metaphysics on which it is explainable (in principle, even if we will never be in a position to fill out the explanation in detail) to one on which it is not, other things being equal.

Graham Oppy (2011) urges that it is inevitable that other things will not be roughly equal in this context. We need to weigh explanatory scope against other desiderata for theories, such as simplicity and ontological economy. And he contends that when we do take these into account, it is not at all obvious that Naturalism (as a metaphysical doctrine) will not come out ahead of Theism, all things considered. As he notes, accepting the theistic explanatory framework commits one to a new kind of entity having new kinds of properties and new theoretical problems (reconciling human freedom and divine conservation, etc.).

In reply, we should observe first of all that not all explanations of existence that posit the existence of a necessary being are theistic. An initial advantage of a broadly 'Spinozistic' ontology is precisely that it involves no new entities (at least, no new and wholly independent entities). But suppose that there were powerful reasons to prefer a theistic construal of necessary being to other accounts. Then we should observe, second, that (contingentist) Naturalism simply is not a rival explanatory scheme for existence to Theism. Naturalism accepts as brute what Theism seeks to explain. Further, if we let *naturalism* (small n) denote the full, structured set of true empirical explanations supposed to exist by philosophical *Naturalism* (big N), minus any claim of explanatory comprehensiveness, then the theistic explanatory schema can (and ought) to absorb small-n naturalism. For an unconditional

explanation of existence need not in any way compete with conditional, empirical explanations of the sort that comprise the explanatory nuts and bolts of the naturalist scheme. Indeed, it is natural to suppose that empirical explanations will be subsumed within the larger structure of the complete explanation, consistent with the plausible, deep assumption that reality is unified.

Now, Oppy is correct to insist on the relevance of the fact that a naturalist might judge the internal conceptual problems facing Theism to be intractable. Conditional on this judgment, would it not be rationally preferable to forgo the possibility of explaining existence? I don’t believe so. For if one makes this judgment, there is a better fallback option: a construal of necessary being as an impersonal transcendent and indeterministic cause of contingent existence. Such a view likely doesn’t face whatever problems Oppy or other naturalists might judge to afflict Theism. It would require giving implausibly decisive weight to economy of ontological commitment to judge that it is better to forgo explanation altogether than to accept the existence of an unobserved necessary being.

That said, I would make one modest concession to Oppy on this matter. Since, as a practical matter, we are at best in a position to give reasons in favor of this or that explanatory schema, epistemic modesty is in order. We must necessarily for the epistemic possibility that a favored, or indeed any, explanatory schema cannot be fully and consistently developed. If we knew this to be so, we would after all have reason to reject our principles of explanation on the excellent grounds that they cannot possibly be satisfied. But this concession does not invite skepticism about the project any more than the possibility of overlooked difficulties with complex physical theories should invite skepticism (as opposed to a healthy circumspection in confidence) about the project of pursuing true physical theories.

7 WHICH EXISTENCE QUESTION?

We are now in a position to see that certain ways of formulating the question regarding contingent existence that is to be answered make questionable assumptions about the form an explanation schema for existence must take. It is commonly put thus: Why is there anything at all? But this very general formulation admits important distinct ways of making it more precise: Why are there contingent things? What are contingent things rather than there being nothing contingent at all? Why do these contingent things exist? And why do these contingent things exist rather than those apparently possible others?

I suggest that the best formulation of the question is this:

The Basic Question of Contingent Existence

Are there contingently existing objects, and if there are, why do those particular contingent objects there are exist and undergo the events they do?

The reason to prefer this formulation is that it presumes the least about what there is to be explained and what form a true explanation may turn out to have. Spinoza questioned the common assumption that there are any contingent truths at all. The second half of the Basic Question sets a minimum bar for precluding brutally (wholly inexplicable) contingent existences or occurrences in reality. Some explanations consistent with PCE I and the more general PCE II are not consistent with PSR and are no worse for that. Contingency rooted in indeterministic causes need not be brute.

Finally, let me try to clarify a subtle issue in the neighborhood.18 We start by noting that all noncontrastive explanations for P appear to provide, in trivial fashion, the materials for corresponding contrastive explanations of P rather than not-P—the limit case, we might say, of contrastive facts. Since P is equivalent to not-not-P, explaining why P plausibly provides the resources for explaining why not-not-P. (There are niceties to be explored here that turn on the intensionality of explanations, but I don’t think these suffice to call into question the claim I just made.) And to explain why P and (thereby) why it’s not the case that not-P seems tantamount to explaining why P rather than not-P.

But now consider the question Why is there something contingent rather than there being nothing contingent?, a question that has the form of Why P rather than not-P? I have been arguing, it seems, that there could be an adequate noncontrastive explanation of the first disjunct (there is something contingent) in terms of its being indeterministically caused by God in accordance with certain (resistible) reasons. So, if and why is there something contingent rather than there being nothing contingent? is asking for a trivially contrastive explanation, the requisite answer should fall out of the noncontrastive explanation. But this contrastive question appears not to be answered by appeal to a nonnecessitating cause that need not have caused anything contingent at all. So what’s going on here?

We have gone astray, I believe, in the very first step, where it was supposed that the contingent activity of a necessary being noncontrastively explains the fact that there is something contingent. For this question is implicitly contrastive, and thus so must be any adequate answer to it. Unpacked, it asks, Why does one of these possibilities—the one that involves contingently existing things—obtain, rather than none of them? Whether it has an answer depends on the details of the proposed theistic scenario. One might suppose that while it was undetermined which contingent reality God produced, it was necessary that God produce some reality or other. (One reason to think this might be so comes from the Platonic-medieval thesis that Goodness naturally diffuses itself.)19 In that case, there will be available an explanation for our implicitly contrastive question. But if we do not suppose this, then we also do not have reason to suppose an explanation of there is something contingent. In this scenario, the question that has an

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18. Thanks to William Lane Craig for raising this matter in discussion.
19. For discussion, see Kretzmann (1988) and O’Connor (2008: ch. 3).
explanatory answer is Why is there this contingent reality?, a different question from Why is there anything contingent?

8 ON THE DISPARAGEMENT OF ‘RATIONALISM’

I turn to a final objection. Endorsing a metaphysical explanation schema for contingent existence, empiricists complain, is indulging in an extreme and outmoded variety of ‘rationalism’. John Mackie (1982), for example, scorned the assumption that our world is ‘intelligible through and through’, or completely intelligible, in the way that would be the case if existence itself admitted of explanation.

Such a charge, when made explicit, is either mistaken or liable to be turned back on the one who makes it. If Mackie is right that our universe is not intelligible, then a necessary being that either constitutes all of reality or serves as the source of an independent contingent reality doesn’t just happen to be absent, as it happens to be the case that there are no unicorns; its existence is impossible. For it cannot be the case that there is no necessary being, there might have been one. The concept’s peculiar logic precludes that. (This is the lesson of the modal ontological argument.) The concept of a necessary being is of one that could not have failed to exist, absolutely speaking. For such a being to be possible, it must be such that it would exist in every possible circumstance, including the actual one. That’s precisely why the question of its existence cannot arise, thereby ending the regress of explanation nonarbitrarily.) Thus, in opposing a ‘rationalist’ commitment to the complete intelligibility of our world, the critic is thereby advancing an equally strong thesis, implicitly held as a necessary truth: it is necessarily the case that there is no complete explanation. Given that our natural, intuitive assent is toward our world’s being completely intelligible (as the pervasive tendency to raise the question of the explanation of existence indicates), it is hard to motivate the Mackian attitude. Furthermore, note the distinctness of two ‘rationalist’ theses:

1. Existence has an explanation. (Reality is intelligible ‘through and through’.)

2. Human beings are capable of laying bare the full intelligibility of reality.

Attacks on rationalism are quite plausible when directed at (2), a thesis held by very few, if any, philosophers of tradition. As I’ve emphasized, it is

20. I here assume with many that SS is the correct logic of absolute necessity: facts concerning what is possible or necessary are invariant, in the sense that whatever might have contingently been the case, what is actually possible or necessary would still have been so.

REFERENCES


21. Versions of this material were presented to audiences at the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame; the Butler Society at Oriel College, the University of Oxford; the Philosophy of Cosmology conference at St. Anne’s College, also at Oxford; Wheaton College, St. Louis University, The University of London’s Institute of Philosophy, Baylor University, Davidson College, Biola University, the University of Nebraska, Omaha, and as a plenary address at the annual meetings of the Evangelical Philosophical Society in New Orleans. I hope the present paper is considerably clearer as a result of the helpful criticisms and suggestions I received. I wish to thank in particular Robert Audi, John Bishop, Todd Buras, John Churchhill, William Lane Craig, Thomas Crisp, Thomas Flint, John Greco, John Hare, Jeff Koperski, Matthew Lee, Brian Littow, Michael Murray, Samuel Newlands, Alex Pruss, Michael Rea, Chris Tweed, and, finally, Sir Martin Rees, my commentator at the cosmology conference. I have also benefited from reading reviews of Theism and Ultimate Explanation by Peter Forrest, Robert Koons, T.J. Mawson, Samuel Newlands, Graham Opp, and Tom Senor.