

Is God's Necessity Necessary?

Replies to Senor, Oppy, McCann, and Almeida

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I am grateful to each of my critics for their thoughtful and probing comments and objections. I will try to respond to the main points made by each author, though given the allotted space, I shall have to be brief.

Senor

Tom Senor asks why I formulate the Existence Question in a way that presumes a positive or substantive answer.¹ To do so is to ignore theism's chief rival, "brute naturalism," on which the existence of the universe is a brute fact. ^{Text} My appeal to the greater explanatory power of theism as a reason to prefer it to brute naturalism is odd, he suggests, for 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 "cries out for explanation" (even if, as Senor himself supposes, it in fact has an explanation).²

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. 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

ABSTRACT: I briefly defend the following claims in response to my critics: (1) We cannot make a principled division between features of contingent reality that do and features that don't "cry out for explanation." (2) The physical data indicating fine-tuning provide confirmation of the hypothesis of a personal necessary cause of the universe over against an impersonal necessary cause, notwithstanding the fact that the probability of either hypothesis, if true, would be 1. (3) Theism that commits to God's necessary existence makes more sense than theism that denies it. (4) God is likely to have created an infinity of universes, and this conclusion helps with (though does not solve) the many problems of evil.

1. Thomas D. Senor, "On the Tenability of Brute Naturalism and the Implications of Brute Theism," *Philosophia Christi* 12 (2010): 273–80.

2. *Ibid.*, 277.

which facts a theorist might sensibly hope to explain at a given stage of inquiry. And fruitful theories frame inquiry in ways that place certain kinds of fact 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 (purposive or mechanistic, deterministic or merely probabilistic) whatsoever. 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 fact 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. Hume, Kant, and others have tried to argue that the idea of necessary (concrete) existence is incoherent and/or "empty" (and so explanatorily useless); that appeal to necessary existence to explain contingency leads to "modal collapse," such that all is necessity; that cosmological reasoning results in insoluble antinomies; and so on. If any 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. I argue in my book that these contentions are mistaken. If—but only if—my conclusion on this score is well-founded, so that 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*. (And I don't see how one denies this without conceding too much to the skeptic about any putative explanation that appeals to theoretical entities.)

Senor goes on to make an interesting suggestion in reply to my argument, *contra* the radically de-Hellenizing theologian, that a theist cannot plausibly deny that God is a necessary being: one might be a "brute theist" who maintains that, while contingent, God is the only possible source of being and power. There is only one world at which God doesn't exist and it is empty. So one needn't concede the damaging consequence for divine sovereignty that I allege, namely, the possibility of one or more contingent beings popping into existence outside the exercise of divine power.

This sort of halfway-house position is one that I had not considered. I grant that, if brute theism had the same degree of integrity and theoretical

power as necessary being theism, then it escapes my argument. However, it seems to me an unattractive position. Since God is contingent according to it, He cannot be the ground of modal truth in the way that I endorse in the book.³ Consider in that light the following two consequences of brute theism:

- (1) Necessarily, if God does not exist, there is nothing (concrete).
- (2) Necessarily, if God does exist, then everything (concrete) that exists other than God Himself is caused to exist by God.

What would account for these two necessities within a brute theistic metaphysics? As far as I can tell, it could not be God or anything else. They would be fundamental necessities not grounded in any concrete nature that shape the space of metaphysical possibility. I trust that I am not alone in being unsatisfied with this position. (1) and (2) don't seem to me to be good candidates for that status. One wants to hear a further story about modal reality on which these two truths fall out of a deeper, more unified account. If this were the only way for the theist to resist necessary-being theism, we should abandon our resistance for the explanatory gain attained by supposing that God's nature is the source of all modal truth. And note that, in any case, Senor's brute theism will not be attractive to the de-Hellenizing theologians who were my principal target, as all it does it take the necessity out of God and set it loose to float free in Plato's heaven.

Oppy

Graham Oppy lays out, in his usual clear and elegant way, certain formally open abstract options concerning "causal reality."⁴ Collectively, they constitute a helpful matrix to get us first thinking about the matter. However, we cannot properly adjudicate among them without going on to engage more substantive metaphysical intuitions. Consider the positions *CIRCLE* and the initial-segment-as-necessary version of *REGRESS* (neither of which Oppy wants to advance himself). Viewed through a bloodlessly diagrammatic lens, they may seem perfectly alright (they involve no logical or other formal form of incoherence). But they are (or should be) nonstarters, for all that. If we are causal realists, as I argue we should be, *CIRCLE*'s closed loop of causes makes no sense. A cannot *bring about* B if it is also the case that B brings about facts which themselves bring about A. The problem with the initial-segment-as-necessary version of *REGRESS* is less obvious, and I can only gesture at the reason why, which is implicit in chapter 4 of my book. The initial segment will be composed of distinct, causally ordered states that differ intrinsically from one another. Each state will be the state of (or simply be, depending on

3. For a recent development of this general position with respect to modality, see Alexander Pruss, "The Actual and the Possible," in *Blackwell Guide to Metaphysics*, ed. Richard M. Gale (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 317–33.

4. Graham Oppy, "The Shape of Causal Reality," *Philosophia Christi* 12 (2010): 281–7.

our preferred way of thinking about objects and events) a necessary being. Each will have intrinsic properties, some of which differ from the intrinsic properties of the others. This implies that *necessary existence* is only contingently related to each one of these distinct sets of properties. Were that so, the contingent facts that necessary existence is conjoined separately to property clusters C_1 , C_2 , . . . , and C_n would be objectionably brute, without ultimate explanation.

According to Oppy, however, we can motivate the claim that the initial state of the universe is necessary independent of considerations regarding the metaphysical unity of that state/being. We do so by proposing a *theory* of absolute modality on which all possible worlds share the same initial segment and the same laws—variations across possible worlds all reflect diverging outcomes of identical, objectively chancy events. This raises a large matter that I cannot adequately treat here. But in short, I would contend that this proposal is best seen as a reductionist account of modality, and I argue in the book that modal reductionism is implausible on very general grounds.

Oppy applies this reductionist proposal to my discussion of physical fine-tuning as evidence of purposive design. If the initial state/segment plus the laws are necessary, it was inevitable that the unfolding cosmos would be life permitting. And if that is so, then fine-tuning is not susceptible to further explanation. I address something like this move in the book. I consider two competing possibilities concerning the nature of a presumed transcendent necessary cause of the contingent universe (on which the cause is either purposive or nonpurposive). If the cause is nonpurposive, then, far from being unlikely given the evidence of fine-tuning, its existence is certain, having an objective metaphysical probability of unity. So, the objector concludes, fine-tuning is irrelevant in a context when we are considering hypotheses concerning necessary beings. Against this suggestion, I claim that the relevant probability here is epistemic, not metaphysical. We try to judge the plausibility of the competing hypotheses concerning the source of cosmic fine-tuning. How comparatively epistemically likely is it that a necessary being which is and one which is not sensitive to the value of intelligent life would give rise to a universe with intelligent life, given that such a universe would require exquisite fine-tuning? Pending further argument, there is nothing about the notion of an impersonal world-generating necessary being to suggest it is disposed by nature to causing a fine-tuned universe. By contrast, if there were a purposive necessary being, one expects that a universe with intelligent life would have some attraction. Given the need for fine-tuning and the fact that this universe is all the evidence we have, we should conclude that the intelligent-life-sustaining character of our universe provides relative confirmation of the purposive being hypothesis.

McCann

Hugh McCann argues that the thesis that God's existence is objectively necessary is explanatorily impotent, "since . . . God's own being has to be considered ontologically prior to anything [such as necessity] grounded in it."⁵ I'm not sure that I grasp the problem that McCann sees here. God's necessity is not conceived as something entirely independent of God's being or existence; it is a superlative *way* of existing. There is no fact of being ontologically prior to God's necessary existence since the latter is partly constitutive of the former.

McCann proposes as an alternative to divine necessity the property of *aseity*, which he glosses as "complete existential integrity."⁶ I am skeptical that we can satisfactorily spell out *aseity* in completely nonmodal terms. Does it signify anything beyond the following three claims?

- (1) God exists.
- (2) God did not come to be.
- (3) God's continuing to be at all times is not dependent on the existence or activity of any other existing thing.

If not, it would seem to make sense that God should judge it *fortunate* that He exists—but surely any satisfactory account of God's *aseity* should render this thought absurd.

McCann turns from divine existence to creation. Here, he defends an "aesthetic" model of divine creation over the predominant "deliberational" model, on which God "select[s] the world or worlds he will actualize from a complete set of exhaustively described alternatives *given in advance*."⁷ The problem with this account, as he sees it, is that it reduces God to a "conjurer," not a creator, an agent wholly lacking in spontaneity or art. But what exactly does it mean to say that the alternatives are *given in advance* to God? God is not a finite agent to whom ideas and plans come from outside. Consistent with the deliberational model, one may suppose with Leibniz that the whole array of alternatives God conceives have their source in God, who necessarily brings them into being by His very act of thinking.

On McCann's alternative aesthetic model, God's act of creation does not *follow* a plan, it *produces* it. The plan "emerges" with the thing itself. Consider the properties of triangularity (within a two-dimensional Euclidean geometry) or humanity. On McCann's picture, there is triangularity because God created triangles and humanity because God created humans, so that God creates the modal reality pertaining to such things (their essences and the like) by creating instances of those things. Now, it is possible to square

5. Hugh McCann, "Modality and Sovereignty: On *Theism and Ultimate Explanation*," *Philosophia Christi* 12 (2010): 291.

6. *Ibid.*, 290.

7. *Ibid.*, 293 (emphasis added).

some of what McCann says with a Leibnizian account, but he pretty plainly intends something more radical. As best I can judge, his account is a theistic form of modal reductionism: the space of possibility is fixed by and explanatorily posterior to God's creative act in bring about a concrete universe. Even so, he allows for the coherence of (though he refrains from affirming) the claim that God may have created other universes besides our own.⁸ But what could ground the truth of that claim, if there are not facts concerning God's power that are metaphysically and explanatorily prior to God's actual exercise of power?

Almeida

Michael Almeida focuses his attention on multiverse solutions to "the problem of no best world and the many problems of evil," which bear some relation (though less than he supposes, I believe) to an argument that I give in chapter 5 from theism to the existence of infinitely many universes.⁹

The problem of no best world has been developed by William Rowe.¹⁰ Its central premise is that "it is *a priori* impossible that a perfect creator should actualize a world that is less good than infinitely many others that he might have actualized."¹¹ In Rowe's hands, the argument takes the form of a dilemma: either there is a best possible world (or set of equally best worlds) or not. If so, a creator God would be unfree (a corollary, he contends, of the central premise), and so not perfect for that very reason. If not, then given that there is a contingent reality and the central premise, there cannot be a perfect Creator. So there is no perfect Creator.

I myself do not accept the argument's central premise. (And so Almeida is incorrect to interpret me as offering a multiverse solution to that problem.) Suppose it is true that there is no best world or worlds and that worlds can be ordered with respect to value with no finite upper bound. Rowe motivates the central premise with the thought that a Creator who simply chose a particular very good world of value n would plainly be less morally good than a possible alternative Creator whose minimum threshold for world selection were $2n$; generalized, the claim is that a creator's degree of moral goodness necessarily co-varies with its minimum standards for creative action. I find this claim unconvincing.¹²

8. *Ibid.*

9. Michael J. Almeida, "On Permissive Multiverses," *Philosophia Christi* 12 (2010): 297–307.

10. William Rowe, *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

11. Almeida, "On Permissive Multiverses," 298.

12. I discuss Rowe's book in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, April 8, 2005 (<http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=2401>), as well as in the fifth chapter of *Theism and Ultimate Explanation: The Necessary Shape of Contingency* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).

However, I believe that there *is* a puzzle concerning the activity of a perfect Creator that is in the neighborhood of Rowe's reflection on world rankings and that may yield a surprising result. Consider, not possible worlds (in the philosophical sense), but possible universes, or causally-connected creative outputs of an omnipotent Creator. And suppose as before that universes may be ranked with respect to value without finite upper bound. It seems to me that, if this much is correct *and* a perfect Creator is restricted to selecting just one of the infinitely many universes, a natural creative ambition would be thwarted: like a master artisan, a perfect Creator would not be entirely satisfied with creating something very good in the full knowledge that He was capable (and at no greater cost) of creating products of arbitrarily better value. If this were inevitable, then perhaps his "natural creative ambition" would be ignored with sanguinity. (Humans, or at least human philosophers, might find themselves regretting the absence of an impossibility, but a perfect being is unlikely to be beset with such a peculiar affliction.) But, it seems to me, it is not inevitable. A perfect Creator is not limited to the creation of one universe, one causally-interconnected totality. He would be capable of creating any number of them. The natural creative ambition is realizable by—and only by—creating an infinite hierarchy of universes, ordered by goodness without upper bound. This does not entail a single creative option, as there are infinitely many distinct hierarchies satisfying this condition. I am *not* supposing (as Almeida himself tentatively supposes) that a perfect Creator would be motivated by a principle of plenitude, on which He would create every possible universe, or every universe that is on-balance good.¹³ Rather, the creative motivation would be not to settle for a finite limit on the *individual organic goodness* of any of His products. (It may well be that He would have a distinct motivation to realize every fundamental kind of good-making feature, some of which are incommensurable. If so, this would put a further constraint on universe types, taken collectively, within a candidate infinite hierarchy.) My tentative conclusion is that there is compelling reason for a perfect Creator to embrace just such a choice. If the God of classical theism exists, then, it is likely that there are infinitely many distinct universes (totalities that are causally isolated from each other save for their common origin in and continual dependency on God Himself.)

More refinement of my multiverse-creation thesis is needed, but here I simply refer the reader to the fifth chapter of my book. As Almeida notes, I see the thesis as having some positive bearing on the multifaceted set of problems of evil—though I do not suggest that it furnishes the basis for a solution to any such problem. From the perspective it affords, the theodicist

13. Presumably it is universe *types*, not *tokens*, that are in view here. Given that there seems to be no finite or even transfinite limit to the number of duplicates of a given type a perfect Creator might bring about, the aim of plenitude makes no sense applied to tokens. And as for type plenitude, is it obvious that a perfect Creator should be concerned to realize every arbitrarily small variation relative to a given universe type?

has the benefits of not needing to suppose that some of the goods realized within *our* universe are among the best goods there can be; that some of the goods that are realized in our universe would not be possible if much of the most intense varieties of suffering were prevented from occurring; or that our universe is among a class of best possible universes.

Almeida's central claim concerning the problem of evil is that a perfect Creator would *minimize aggregative disvalue*.¹⁴ Roughly speaking, this would be accomplished by creating a collection of universes that aggregatively is as good as any other possible collection yet which excludes all universes that feature intense and widely distributed sentient suffering, even those universes that are on-balance very good.¹⁵

It is natural to object that this creative strategy unduly sacrifices certain valuable *kinds* of goodness in Creation through a maniacal focus on aggregative value and disvalue. Almeida makes a rather bold claim that is, I take it, meant to undercut this response: "Certainly there are universes with all of the organic unity of the actual world, all of the basic and composite beings instantiated in the actual world, and none of the suffering."¹⁶ While the basic contention might be correct, it is certainly not *certain*. (And, speaking for myself, I do not think it so much as likely.) It is not at all obvious that global good-making features of our universe—quite possibly connected to its large-scale causal structure—have no integral connection to significant suffering in its sentient denizens. Here I simply refer the reader to work on the problem of evil by Peter van Inwagen.¹⁷ Nor is it obvious that some forms of individual moral goodness—heroism and sacrifice, say, along with perseverance and trust—are possible in the absence of significant suffering. Again, within a multiverse theism, one needn't suppose that these good are among the very *best* goods for moral agents there are, just that they are indeed valuable, so that a perfect Creator might wish to see them realized within the totality of His creation. Almeida's bold claim seems to me to be unduly bold: some argument is needed, and I fail to see in Almeida's otherwise careful discussion any argument for it at all.

14. The reader should note that Almeida ("On Permissive Multiverses," 21n15) connects the term "gratuitous evil" in a nonstandard way to his notion of minimizing disaggregative value.

15. *Ibid.*, 305–6.

16. *Ibid.*, 305.

17. See, e.g., his recent book, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).