Is God the Best Explanation of Things?

A Dialogue

Joshua Rasmussen · Felipe Leon

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"This is a terrific book. It is bold in its approach, and interesting in its details. Rasmussen and Leon are to be congratulated both for the spirit in which their investigation is conducted and for the contributions that they make to advancing discussion."

—Graham Oppy, *Professor of Philosophy, Monash University, Australia*

"The authors of this clear and absorbing volume are intent on saying the best that can presently be said on behalf of theism and naturalism. Energetically, they produce clever arguments for their respective views, many of them new or interestingly refashioned, grounded in the latest relevant results from a wide range of areas. But Leon and Rasmussen have also adopted a more deliberately collaborative and constructive approach than is visible in any similar work. And by this means they succeed in exposing how much more flexible and variously construable are the concepts of theism and naturalism themselves than the history of their discussion would have led one to expect. One almost dares to think that a future agreement on the God question is possible!"

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"This book brings together the formidable talents of two philosophers to bear on one of the most intractable problems in philosophy: the question of whether or not we have good reason to accept the existence of God. The prose is clear and accessible, and the arguments are well-developed and rigorous. It should be of interest and value to a wide range of readers and would make an excellent text for courses in the philosophy of religion, in particular."

—Andrei Buckareff, *Associate Professor of Philosophy; Co-Director of the Cognitive Science Program, Marist College, USA*

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Introduction

Joshua Rasmussen and Felipe Leon

1   Purpose

In recent years, philosophers have made remarkable progress on the development and analysis of arguments relevant to the existence/nonexistence of a supreme being. A problem, however, is that many of these developments become lost in the smoke of polarizing debates. We want to explore this topic afresh, by bringing the latest ideas into a new, collaborative investigation of the ultimate explanation of things.

We explore the topic in a friendly, constructive manner. Rather than seek to win an argument, we aim to build upon each other's ideas in an effort to see more truth. We do not hold up flags for a team or tribe. Nor do we seek victory in a debate. Instead, we seek to learn from each other, as we seek new paths into new lands.

We find that debates often become entrenched in the defense of previous packages. Progress stalls. Time and effort go into the defense of prior positions, leaving unexplored territories unexplored.

We seek another path. We want to see if we can promote significant progress on a universal question through *a depolarized style*. We want to break new ground, if we can. Our aim, then, is to see if we can bring into view a clearer vision of the foundation of existence.

In view of the wide interest in the question of God's existence, we also want this book to be widely accessible. While the book is a resource

for professional philosophers, we write in a style that is accessible to a broad thoughtful audience. We want everyone who is interested in the question of God's existence to be able to follow along.

2   WHAT TO EXPECT

For the sake of focus, we concentrate on the following question: What is the best, ultimate explanation of the general features of our world? We do not attempt to tackle all the major themes related to the question of God's existence. Instead, we narrow our scope to the question of *explanation*. We use inference to the best explanation as a tool to probe the foundation of things. Together, we seek the best ultimate explanation of everything.

We divide our discussion into three sections. First, we ask whether there is a foundation for universe (along with the related question of what it might mean for the universe to have a foundation). Second, we ask whether, if the universe has a foundation, this foundation is personal. Third, we ask whether the foundation could be a perfectly good, supreme being. Each section divides into a back and forth exchange across several chapters.

By dividing the book into these sections, we are able to organize our path. In the first section, we lay groundwork for later sections. We begin by discussing whether there is a necessarily existent foundation of things. In this way, we separate questions about God's nature from arguments relevant to particular features of a foundational reality. For example, rather than assume that God would have necessary existence, or that a necessary foundation would be God, we lay down an initial plank in the larger inquiry, as we probe the nature and existence of *both* God and the foundation. This separation facilitates a progressive inquiry, where each section builds upon planks we put down in the previous sections.

This exchange displays a real-life conversation as friends. We originally began the conversation via e-mail correspondence. We were curious to draw out each other's views. Rasmussen enters the dialogue as a theist, while Leon enters as a non-theist. We both understand what it is like to see things from the other side, as we have both been on the other side. We also have concentrated much of our professional research on seeking a deeper understanding of the foundation of things, and so we have been curious to see what might come out of a sustained correspondence.

The conversation has indeed reaped special fruits. We followed pathways beyond first and second rounds of debates, and we found ourselves stepping into new lands. At the end of each section, we share some of the things we learned from the dialogue up to that point and give final reflections on the whole dialogue in the Epilogue. On several occasions, we develop new terms to describe our respective views, as we uncover some striking similarities in our vision the foundation. While questions remain and new paths open, one theme that emerges is that a broad naturalism and broad theism can overlap in profoundly substantial ways. There are many other fruits and discoveries, which readers must simply follow in the journey to see.

Is There a Foundation for the Universe?

CHAPTER 2

For a Foundation

Joshua Rasmussen

1   INTRODUCTION

In order to investigate a subject as deep as the existence of God, it will help to start at the foundation of existence. A classic thought is that the best ultimate explanation of existence—i.e., why anything exists at all—will include reference to a necessary, supreme foundation. In this statement, I will focus on *necessity*. I will offer three reasons in support of the thesis that there is a necessarily existent foundation. The reasons are (i) from explanation, (ii) from contingency, and (iii) from possible causes. In the final section, I will respond to what may be the most common objection to the necessary foundation theory. My case for a necessary foundation is a first plank in a larger argument (to be unpacked in subsequent chapters) for a foundation of the material world.

2   Reason One: Inference to the Best Explanation

We can wonder what explains the existence things. Why are there any things at all? Why not *none*? These "why" questions are not about the *purpose* of existence; rather, they are about the *explanation* of existence: What, if anything, accounts for the existence of concrete things?[1]

One classic answer is that there is an ultimate *foundation* of contingent concrete things, where this foundation exists *of necessity*. On this foundation theory, reality divides into two sections. There is the "bottom" (ultimate) section, which is fundamental, uncaused, and self-existent. The foundation *cannot fail* to exist. Its necessity accounts—in some sense—for why it exists at all; or, its necessity accounts for why it has no deeper explanation. The "upper" section of reality, by contrast, is dependent, caused, and ultimately explained by a prior or more fundamental state of reality. On the foundation theory, all *concreta*—big or small, individual or plural—may have an explanation, either in terms of explanatorily prior states or in terms of a necessary nature.

Before we consider alternative explanations of existence (of why there are any concrete things), I will say more about the meaning of the term "necessity." In this context, I take "necessity" to denote what *must actually be* in the most basic sense. We can grasp the concept via examples: It is necessary that red is a color; it is necessary that no prime number is a prime minister; it is necessary that a cube has more volume than any of its proper parts; it is necessary that justice is a virtue; and so on. These examples illustrate metaphysical necessities.

Metaphysical necessities differ from *epistemic* necessities. Something can be necessary even if no one knows it. For example, it might turn out to be necessary that matter is infinitely divisible, but I am not rationally required to think this. The "necessity" in view concerns the way things in reality must be *independent of what anyone thinks*. For this reason, something could be necessary even if it is not deducible from some set of logical rules humans beings happen to consider

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[1] I wish to be neutral about the meaning of "concrete existence." But for sake of precision, it is consistent with our purposes to narrow our scope to things that can be part of a causal or explanatory chain. Thus, we can follow Alexander's Dictum: to be [concrete] is to have causal [else, explanatory] power.

"canonical." The necessity is about the world, not our current methods of demonstration.[2]

We can gain a more precise grasp of the relevant concept of necessity by considering its logical properties. I will understand "necessity" in terms of the standard system, **S5**[3]:

M: $\square p \to p$ (where "$\square$" abbreviates "it is necessary that")
K: $\square(p \to q) \to (\square p \to \square q)$
4: $\square p \to \square\square p$
5: $\lozenge p \to \square\lozenge p$ (where "$\lozenge$" abbreviates "$\sim\square\sim$").

For general readership, here is a translation. I shall speak of necessary, possible, and actual *states of affairs*—for example, the state of affairs of Bertrand Russell never studying philosophy. (We could also translate everything in terms of *propositions*.) On this interpretation, axiom **M** says that if a state of affairs *must* obtain, then it actually does obtain. From this axiom, we may deduce that any state of affairs that *actually* obtains also *possibly* obtains.[4] **M** thus shows a relationship between actuality and modality. Axiom **K** shows a relationship between modality and logical consequence: A logical consequence of a necessary state of affairs is itself a necessary state of affairs. Finally, axioms **4** and **5** tell us that modality is itself necessary. Thus, for example, if a state of affairs is metaphysically necessary, then it is necessary that it is necessary. And, if a state of affairs is possible (i.e., consistent with whatever is necessary), then it is

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[2] To be clear, the so-called strict logical truths (truths deducible from canonical laws) may be *epistemically* stronger, in the sense that they are easier to demonstrate. Still, strict logical truths are not thereby "metaphysically" stronger. As Swinburne (2012) and others have suggested, we may treat logical necessities as a species of metaphysical necessities.

[3] I do not include **N** (the necessitation rule) because it, together with standard logic, implies that the theorem, $\exists x \, (x = x)$, is necessary, and thus that there must be something. I wish to avoid building into the *meaning* of "necessity" anything that strictly implies the controversial metaphysical hypothesis that there must be something. Moreover, the axioms I give sufficiently characterize an important conception of metaphysical necessity.

[4] The deduction goes as follows. Suppose p does *not* possibly obtain. We defined "possible" as "not necessarily not." So it follows that it is *necessary* that p doesn't obtain (applying double negation). So, by M, p doesn't actually obtain. The contrapositive is this: If p actually obtains, then p possibly obtains.

necessary that it is possible. These axioms record the idea that absolute, metaphysical necessity is rooted in the basic, unalterable nature of reality. That is to say, modal truths are *bedrock* principles of reality: They cannot be otherwise.

Although philosophers may debate the axioms, I intend to use them here to convey one important interpretation of "metaphysical necessity." Thus, the S5 axioms implicitly define "□." The axioms limit the scope of "possible" states of affairs to those for which the accessibility relation is symmetric and transitive. We then define "necessity" in terms of "possible": Any state of affairs that does not possibly obtain is necessary.

In view of the above account of "□," we may state the foundation theory as follows:

Necessary foundation: $\exists x \ \Box \ x$ is the foundation of all else.

In other words, there is something, such that necessarily, it is the ultimate foundation of whatever else exists.

I will now provide a few initial thoughts about three alternative explanations of existence on the market. First, there is Peter van Inwagen's earlier proposal that we can explain why there is anything by the fact that it is *highly improbable* that there is nothing (1996, p. 95–120). This proposal may explain existence on one level, but a puzzle remains. What accounts for the likelihood itself? Suppose planets are likely to exist. Why are they likely? Isn't the answer that some planets were likely to have been *produced* (eventually)? Suppose there was never anything *capable* of producing, or forming into, a planet. Would planets then be *likely*? You might think that the very likelihood of planets is explicable in terms of the likelihood of planet producers (i.e., materials that can form into a planet). Without planet producers, planets would not be likely because they would not even be possible.

To further draw out this deeper layer of explanation, suppose for a moment that there are *only* dependent things: Each dependent thing depends upon another. Now we have a problem: Nothing within the nature of dependent things makes those dependent things, in total, *independent*. To illustrate, suppose some clay is dependent in nature. Then packing together more and more dependent clay would not thereby produce some clay that is *independent* in nature. The size of the clay makes no difference: An infinite bunch of purely dependent clay bits would equally fail to include anything within it that could account for how the total bunch could be independent in nature. This result leads to a puzzle: How can an independent reality arise from purely dependent

realities? My point here is not that this puzzle leads to a decisive argument for an independent foundation (although I think the argument implicit here is very strong). Rather, my point is that we cannot solve this puzzle of dependence merely by the saying that it is *likely* that there are dependent things. Dependent things may be likely (for some reason), but their likelihood doesn't explain how they are even possible.

Necessary foundation, by contrast, has an explanatory advantage here. If we have a necessary foundation, then we have an account for how there can be a total stack of dependent things. The dependent things come from an independent foundation, while the necessary nature of the foundation accounts for its very independence. Probability has nothing to do with it.

Let us turn to another candidate explanation of existence: Things exist because there simply *cannot* be nothing. In other words, there is something because there *must be*. This theory, like the probability theory we just considered, still leaves open a deeper puzzle. The puzzle is in the reason there cannot be nothing. Why can't there be nothing?

Here's a reason: The foundation is necessary. In other words, there cannot be nothing precisely because there is a necessary foundation. We see here that the necessary foundation theory doesn't *compete* with the "there is something because there must be" theory. On the contrary, a necessary foundation anchors the theory.

Now to be clear, I realize that the inference from "necessarily, there is something" to "something is necessary" is not a strict, formal entailment. Still, the inference is plausible. Suppose that *each* thing can fail to be. Then plausibly, *each* thing could be subtracted from reality, one by one, until there are none.[5] In other words, if nothing is necessary, then it is false that necessarily, there is something. Besides this argument from subtraction, we also have the argument from explanation: A necessary foundation *explains* why there must be something. I see no better explanation.

A third and final idea: There is no "deep" answer to the question of existence. Maitzen (2013), for example, suggests that there is something rather than nothing because there are penguins. The idea here is that

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[5] For representative discussions of this subtraction argument, see Baldwin (1996), Lowe (2002), Paseau (2002), Rodriguez-Pereyra (1997, 2000, 2002), Cameron (2006, 2007), Efird et al. (2005, 2006, 2009), and Hoffman (2011).

each thing provides an explanation for why there is anything. After all, the existence of each thing guarantees the existence of something rather than nothing. Therefore, the effort to find a deeper answer to the question, "why is there anything?" is misguided.

I think Maitzen does successfully solve something, but I suspect Maitzen will agree that penguins don't remove every puzzle in this neighborhood.[6] Consider iPhones. Why are there *any* iPhones? On one level, perhaps we could say there are iPhones because there is an iPhone in your pocket, whose existence *entails* that there are iPhones. Yet, pointing to the iPhone in your pocket is not a complete answer; one could still wonder why or how there are any iPhones in the first place. I think the same is so for existence: pointing to particular existing things, like Penguins, leaves open a question about why or how anything ever existed. After all, penguins themselves cannot even exist unless something *already* exists.[7] Compare: iPhones cannot exist unless something already exists. So it seems to me it is perfectly sensible to continue to wonder, how did existence manage to be instantiated in the first place (prior to penguins)? A puzzle remains.[8]

As I suggested above, necessary foundation provides a deeper answer: (concrete) existence is instantiated because it *cannot not* be instantiated. Moreover, the reason (concrete) existence cannot *not* be instantiated

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[6]Maitzen's full argument merits more attention than I can give here. What follows is a path that I think goes between the relevant aspects of his argument, without going into all the details.

[7]Although I use the language of "properties," I do not mean to imply a commitment to abstract objects. Readers may translate what I say in terms of pieces of language, like predicates. Also, in case any readers have the Kantian worry that "existence" is not a predicate, replace "existence" with "concrete [causally-capable] thing."

[8]Here is a proposal as to what else may be driving the puzzle. It is that without a further explanation, we end up with a circular explanation. Here is why. For any predicate F, a full, non-circular explanation of F's instantiation cannot be *solely* in terms of the existence of Fs. To be clear, as Maitzen points out, if F is not a basic *kind*, we could perhaps explain F's instantiation in terms of the instantiation of some more fundamental property G that every instance of F has. For example, we could say there are *chairs or tables* because there are *chairs*. However, notice the *full* explanation of the instantiation of *chairs or tables* is not solely in terms of chairs or tables. A chair-maker—which is neither a chair nor a table—is part of the explanation sequence. In general, to avoid circularity, the full explanation of the instantiation of an F (for any F) is ultimately in terms of *non-Fs* (or else the *necessity* of F). For more on the problem of circularity, see Pruss and Rasmussen (2018, 3.4.3.).

is that there is a foundational (concrete) layer whose nature entails the impossibility of its non-existence.

This survey is brief, and I have only begun to set a stage for our discussion of possible explanations of existence. At this initial step, I think we can agree on at least this much: the necessary foundation theory has *some* things going for it, e.g., simplicity, explanatory power, and internal coherence. These theoretical goods constitute some reason—even if modest—to prefer (or raise the epistemic probability of) necessary foundation over its salient competitors, other things being equal. That is a start.

3   Reason Two: An Argument from Contingency

A second consideration comes from an updated version of a classic contingency-based cosmological argument. Although this argument has taken many forms in its long history, all versions aim to reveal a causal or explanatory link between *contingent existence* and *necessary existence*.[9] This argument typically begins with the mundane premise that something or other exists. Next, the argument purports to provide a rationale for inferring that contingent realities ultimately require a necessary foundation of some sort.

I shall put on the table a contemporary version of the argument that uses plural reference.[10] I call it "the Argument from Contingent Existence"—or "ACE." Here it is:

P1. Something exists.
P2. For any contingent (non-necessary) things, there is a causal foundation of their existence.
P3. Without a necessary foundation, there is no causal foundation of the existence of all the contingent things.
C.   Therefore, there is a necessary foundation.[11]

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[9] For a notable contemporary articulation and defense of an argument from contingency, see O'Connor (2008).

[10] I develop this argument in detail in Pruss and Rasmussen (2018).

[11] In arguing for a necessary causal foundation of contingent things, I am leaving open here whether there may be a deeper non-causal explanation of the entire causal chain. We shall have an opportunity to return to the question of non-causal explanations when we consider the natural vs. theistic account of a necessary foundation in the next section. For a recent and highly penetrating discussion of the role of non-causal explanations in an argument from contingency against naturalism, see Pearce (2017).

Let us consider possible supports for the premises. The first premise, that something exists, is justified by your awareness of your own existence. You exist. Therefore, something exists. I take that to be relatively uncontroversial. Besides, if there is not anything, then there is not anything here for us to debate, not even these very statements!

The more controversial premise is the causal principle, P2: For any contingent (non-necessary) things, there is a causal foundation of their existence.[12] Why think that is true? I will summarize three candidate reasons: (i) the principle is a simple inductive generalization from apparent instances of explanation; (ii) the principle is supported by a priori intuition; and (iii) the principle makes sense of the fact that there is not a chaotic mess of random contingent things coming into existence.

Consider, first, the proposal that the causal principle is an inductive generalization from many apparent instances of explanation. Explanations are part of our ordinary experience. Steve discovers a puddle of milk on the floor, and he wonders where it came from. He assumes there is an answer. Moreover, he assumes the answer *explains*, to some extent, the presence of the puddle of milk. By contrast, Steve does not even entertain the idea that the milk may have popped into place without any explanation at all. What is true for the milk is equally true for countless other contingent configurations of matter. Therefore, we might generalize: For any *xs* that *just happen* to exist (i.e., they do not exist of necessity), there is some causal explanation(s) of their existence.[13] In other words, contingent things, be they few or many, related or unrelated, do not exist without any causal explanation at all.

The above extrapolation is not ad hoc since the causal principle is relatively simple. It is expressible with just a few conceptually basic terms:

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[12]I am assuming for sake of argument that somethings are contingent (i.e., can fail to exist). If instead all things are necessary, then trivially, something concrete is necessary, which is what I'm arguing for. Also, even if everything were necessary, we could recast the argument in terms of those necessary things that are *internally changeable* vs. those that are *internally unchangeable*. Simply replace occurrences of "contingent" with "internally changeable." The conclusion is then that the foundation is internally unchangeable. I leave it to interested readers to investigate the argument on this translation.

[13]The principle leaves open whether or not *necessary* things may also have an explanation, such as an explanation in terms of a self-existent nature or the impossibility of their non-existence.

"cause," "things," "the existence of." As far as I see, no simpler, competing principle can account for the wide range of apparent instances of explanation (putting aside causal principles that imply the causal principle in question). Therefore, in view of the simplicity and explanatory power of the causal principle, it seems to have some inductive support.

Of course, if there are evident counterexamples to the causal principle, then the inductive argument fails. I will consider the prospect of counterexamples in the discussion of objections below.

A second candidate support arises from an a priori *seeming* associated with explaining stuff. To illustrate, pick an arbitrary state of existence E, which consists of things existing. Now suppose E is not necessary: It is metaphysically possible that E never obtains. Suppose also that E in fact obtains. We may wonder why E obtains, considering that E might have been completely absent from reality. Notice that this wonderment remains whether E consists of small things or big things. Similarly, differences in the *shape* of the things in E do not seem relevant: A square object is no more or less likely to snap into being without a cause than a triangular one (for instance). Even if we imagine that E is composed of *non*-spatial contingent things, it seems an explanation of their existence is equally pressing. What is relevant, it seems, is that E doesn't *have to* exist. Its E's *contingency* that inspires a common conviction that there must have been some explanation of its existence.

On the other hand, a priori expectations are notoriously debatable. For this reason, I propose an inclusive approach. If you are someone who has a sense that contingent existence "calls out" for an explanation, then that sense provides you with some positive epistemic support. This support, like any other, is defeasible and so you may weight it in the balance of your total evidence. Only *you* are in a position to estimate its strength, if any, for you. I am assuming here a broadly phenomenal conservativism, which I take to be foundational to both scientific and mathematical reasoning: If it seems to one that p, then, in the absence of defeaters, one has some degree of justification for accepting p.[14]

Here is a third potential support. The causal principle explains why there isn't a chaotic mess of objects snapping in and out of existence. Chaos results if arbitrarily large chunks of matter regularly come into

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[14]See Huemer (2001).

existence uncaused everywhere all the time, without constraint, *for no reason at all*. We don't we observe that happening, of course. But why not? Here is a simple answer: It *can't*. For suppose that unexplained contingent chunks of reality are in fact impossible. Then macroscopic objects cannot come into being unless there are prior states from which they may arise. Given a certain law-like connection between states (whether deterministic or indeterministic), the threat of large-scale chaos diminishes; there is then less expectation that arbitrary chunks of matter would randomly appear, without constraint.

Now suppose instead that unexplained contingent chunks of reality are possible. So, for instance, it is possible, let us say, for there to be a particle-antiparticle pair that has no cause or explanation (not even in terms of an indeterministic law or prior states of energy). Then it would seem that any *number* of unexplained contingent things would possible. It would be quite strange (i.e., contrary to reason) if instead there were some precise finite number of states of existence that could obtain without an explanation: It seems that if two protons, say, can appear without a cause, then so could three, and four, and five, and so on for any number. So, suppose there are *infinitely* many possible contingent chunks of matter, of any size and shape, that can obtain at any given time with no explanation. Then it is puzzling why a random chaos of popping and dropping of existence is not a common phenomenon at every scale. After all, at any moment any number of countless arbitrary mixes of possible objects might snap into being for no reason at all.

The root of the problem is with explaining the difference between the caused and the uncaused. What difference is relevant? Jonathan Edwards expressed the puzzle as follows: "If there be no absurdity or difficulty in supposing one thing to start out of non-existence into being, of itself without a Cause; then there is no absurdity or difficulty in supposing the same of millions of millions" (Edwards 1830, p. 53). Arthur Prior builds upon Edwards: "If it is possible for objects to start existing without a cause, then it is incredible that they should all turn out to be objects of the same sort" (Prior 1968, p. 65). Even if they are not all of exactly the same sort, it is still incredible that they fall into a small number of sorts. The number of sorts of elementary particles appears to be in the double or at most triple digits, whereas the number of particles in the observable universe is of the order of 10^{88} (Kofman 1997, p. 133).

These observations make perfect sense if there is a universal causal order grounded in a necessary foundation.

I have just provided an initial sketch of three lines of support for the causal premise in ACE. Let us now turn to the next premise, P3: Without a necessary foundation, there cannot be a cause of the existence of all contingent things. Why think about that? Here is why. This premise is about *all* the contingent things there actually are. I shall refer to the state of affairs of *the actual contingent things existing* as "the Big Contingent State." P3 records the thought that the Big Contingent State cannot be completely accounted for apart from the causal activity of one or more non-contingent things. This thought is rooted in a general principle: No facts about contingent instances of *F* can, by themselves, causally account for why *there exist* those very *F*s.[15] Thus, no facts about contingent instances of *being contingent* can, by themselves, account for the existence of those very contingent things.[16]

There is a famous Humean objection (developed later by Russell and Paul Edwards) that arises from the following question: Why think there should be an explanation of a *whole* that goes beyond the explanations provided by the individual *parts* (Hume 1779, pp. 58–59)? Perhaps an explanation of the contingent things can simply consist of the conjunction of the explanations of *each c*? Then there would be no need for a non-contingent cause.

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

[16] Notice that we are not asking for an explanation of the fact that there are *any* contingent things at all. Thus, we avoid many of the issues that arise in discussions over the question of why there is anything. For instance, there is no need to assess Maitzen's recent proposal (Maitzen 2013, pp. 252–271) that the fact that there is anything is trivially explained by the fact that there are penguins.

However, my formulation completely sidesteps these worries. That is because I articulated the argument in terms of plural reference, not in terms of wholes. This difference is crucial. For even if the explanation of a whole is entirely in terms of explanations of its parts, the parts *themselves* cannot be explained by those same parts—not without circularity. To avoid circularity, an explanation of the existence of some items (whether finite or infinite) must go beyond those same items. To illustrate this point, suppose you encounter a snake and learn somehow that it has grown by undergoing an infinite number of stages of development. The growth process has occurred as follows: The front half of the snake was caused by events within an adjacent quarter section of it, which in turn was caused by events within an adjacent eighth section, which in turn was caused by events within the preceding sixteenth section, and so on, so that each section was produced by events within an adjacent section half its size. In this scenario, each part of the snake was caused by events within another part, ad infinitum. If there were such a snake, the mere causal connections between the snake's parts would not constitute an explanation of the existence of the snake's infinite parts. Merely causally connecting its parts does nothing to explain why, or how, there are those infinitely many parts in the first place.

Inner-causal connections do nothing to remove the need for an explanation of the connected parts. We can imagine a contingent blob consisting of infinitely many smaller blobs in an infinite, internal causal series. It is no easier for this fictional blob to appear uncaused than for any other contingent blob. Crucially, the three lines of evidence I gave for the causal principle are insensitive to inner-causal connectivity and size. All three lines independently indicate that contingent blobs cannot exist uncaused, *no matter their internal structure (finite or infinite)*. For this reason, the Humean objection does not undermine my specific version of the argument.[17]

To conclude, the premises, each enjoying independent support, jointly entail that there is a necessary foundation.

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[17] I say more about the Humean worry and its variants (including Russell's worry expressed in the Russell-Copleston debate) in Rasmussen (2010). My main response is that while the worries effectively disarm certain defenses of certain versions of the argument, they do not squarely target the particular supports I give for my plural formulation of the causal premise.

4   REASON THREE: AN ARGUMENT FROM POSSIBLE CAUSES

A more recent type of cosmological argument seeks to display a connection between a premise about *possible* causes (or explanations) and necessary foundation. Here is one form of the argument:

P1. Whatever *can* happen *can* be caused to happen. (By "happen," I mean "*begin* to be.")

P2. A Beginning of Contingency (i.e., a beginning of the exemplification of *having non-necessary existence*) can happen.

C1. Therefore, there can be a cause of a Beginning of Contingency.

P3. The only possible cause of a Beginning of Contingency is a non-contingent (necessary) thing that can cause a Beginning of Contingency.

C2. Therefore, there can be a necessary foundation: A necessary thing that can cause a Beginning of Contingency.

P4. If there can be a necessary foundation, then there is one.

C3. Therefore, there is a necessary foundation.

Briefly, here is why I find the premises plausible. P1 seems to me to be the simplest causal principle that explains (i) our experience with events (happenings) having causes, (ii) our *lack* of experience with *uncaused* events, and (iii) the apparent causal *irrelevance* of any differences in size or shape or contents of an event. I see no way to generate counterexample to P1 without dubious assumptions about causation or events—for example, that *tiny* or *large* events are uncausable. Without a counterexample in hand, one can extrapolate from the many known instances of causation to the simplest principle that accounts for them.

I point very briefly to two supports of P2. First, *imagination* is a defeasible guide to possibility: I can imagine a beginning of an explosion that contains all non-necessary concrete materials. Second, there is the apparent independence of non-necessary things: You can subtract *non-necessary* things in your minds' eye, one by one, until none are left. Reverse the subtraction, and you have a Beginning of Contingency.

P3 falls out of a "no circularity" condition on causation: A thing cannot cause its *own* existence, since it would *already* exist. If anyone resists that condition, just replace "cause" in the argument with "external cause," and P3 is then true by definition. My reasons for P1 remain the same in this translation.

We complete the argument in two steps. First, we deduce necessary existence from *possible* necessary existence using standard logic in a familiar way.[18] Thus, from the premises above, we may infer that there *is* a necessary reality that *can* (in some possible world) cause a Beginning of Contingency. From here, it is plausible to conclude that this necessary reality explains *our* contingent reality, since only it can. The principle here is what I call the Sherlock Holmes Principle: If X can explain Y, and nothing else can explain Y, then X (probably) explains Y. The main part of my argument is designed to support the antecedent—that *there is* a necessary reality that *can* explain contingent reality. We now have the steps in another pathway to necessary foundation.[19]

Professor Leon, I am curious what you think of this argument.

5   Hume's Objection from Conceivability

The most persistent objection to the foundation theory is Hume's objection from conceivability (cf. Swinburne 2012). Hume objects that the concept of "necessary existence" cannot apply to anything in reality because anything that can be conceived of as existing can be conceived of as not existing (Hume 1779, p. 58–59).

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[18]We may display the deduction as follows:

D1: Let '~' abbreviate 'it is not the case that'.
D2: Let '◊' abbreviate 'it is possible that'.
D3: Let '□' abbreviate 'it is necessary that' (or '~◊~').
D4: Let 'N' abbreviate 'there is an x, such that □ x exists'.

    1. Assume ◊N.
    2. Then: ◊□N. (□(N → □N), by axioms **4** and **5**)
    3. Now suppose (for the sake of argument) that ◊~N.
    4. Then: □◊~N. (by axiom **5**)
    5. Then: ~◊~◊~N. (by substituting '~◊~' for '□')
    6. Then: ~◊~~□~~N. (by substituting '~□~' for the second '◊')
    7. Then: ~◊□N. (because '~~X' is equivalent to 'X')
    8. But (7) contradicts (2).
    9. So: (3) is not true. ((3) → (7))
    10. So: ~◊~N.
    11. So: □N. (by substituting '□' for '~◊~')
    12. So: N. (□X → X, by axiom **M**)
    13. So: if ◊N, then N.

[19]To explore additional pathways via interactive survey, see www.necessarybeing.com. See also Pruss and Rasmussen (2018).

I offer here a challenge that emerges from post-Humean developments in modal logic. Suppose Hume is right that whatever can be conceived of as existing can be conceived of as not existing. And suppose that a necessary concrete thing N can be *conceived of* in the relevant sense. Then either conceivability implies (or gives evidence for) possibility, or it does not. If conceivability does not provide evidence for possibility, then Hume's objection fails at the start: For then we cannot use conceivability to infer that N's non-existence is possible. So, suppose instead that conceivability provides evidence for possibility. Then since N's existence is itself conceivable (per hypothesis), we have evidence that N's existence is possible. From all this, it follows (by the modal axioms in play) that N exists. In other words, the very assumptions behind Hume's objection, together with the contemporary logic of modality, actually give evidence for a necessary concrete thing. Therefore, the objection fails.[20,21]

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[20] I address contemporary versions of the conceivability objection in Rasmussen (2016).

[21] Thanks to Robert Koons and Kenny Pearce for comments an earlier draft.

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Modal Skepticism and Material Causation

Felipe Leon

1 INTRODUCTION

As we explain in the Introduction, our inquiry into whether reality has a theistic explanation proceeds along with three steps:

Step 1: Does physical or material reality have a cause or ground?
Step 2: Assuming it does, is the cause or ground personal?
Step 3: Assuming it is, is it omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good?

In his opening statement, Rasmussen offers three interesting and powerful arguments for the existence of a metaphysically necessary cause or foundation or ground for (at least) the realm of contingent concrete objects. If his arguments should turn out to be cogent, then he will have successfully completed a core part of the first step. In this chapter, I will raise three main concerns for his arguments for step 1. First, there are general worries about our ability to reliability form judgments about *possibilities* and *necessities* far removed from our ordinary experiences. Second, the hypothesis that there is a metaphysically contingent, yet "factually" necessary foundation of dependent beings remains a live option. Finally, our evidence that things have "material" causes calls into question the possibility of a caused beginning of contingent concrete beings. I will discuss each of these concerns in turn below, applying them to Rasmussen's arguments where relevant.