ISSN 2299-0356

Filozoficzne Aspekty Genezy — **2024, t. 21, nr 1**

Philosophical Aspects of Origin s. 1–18

https://doi.org/10.53763/fag.2024.21.1.237

ARTYKUŁ ORYGINALNY / ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Jonathan L. Kvanvig

Washington University in St. Louis

Contingency and Necessity: Metatheological Considerations

Received: August 10, 2023. Accepted: April 18, 2024. Published online: October 16, 2024.

Abstract: This paper addresses two questions. The first inquires about the line between the contingent and the necessary, and the second about how to explain contingency itself. The goal is a unified explanation of the two. In doing so, we favor approaches that offer plausible explanations even if we agree that no explanation may be needed, resisting only the stronger claim that no explanation is possible. Then we embrace the idea that a unified account of these two aspects of contingency is to be preferred over alternatives, leading to important metatheological results. Those results involve two different approaches to what is fundamental to the nature of deity, and the argument shows a preference for endorsing Creator Theology over a rival Worship-Worthiness approach and, by implication, over Perfect Being Theology as well.

Keywords:

creation;
creator theology;
metatheology;
modality;
necessitarianism;
perfect being theology

1. Introduction

Fundamental to both semantics and ontology is the divide between the necessary and the contingent. From the semantic side, the divide concerns two kinds of truths, and from the ontological side, two aspects of reality. When it comes to theistic understandings of necessity and contingency, there is an inclination to treat contingency in terms of the origin of the universe, though we can be accommodating to Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions that leave open the possibility of the eternity of the world. Perhaps we can speak of the source of contingency, though I'll sometimes resort to the language of creation and origin of the universe, with the accommodating re-phrasing al-

ways available to those with more Aristotelian preferences. The issues concerning contingency don't depend on whether the universe is eternal or came into being at some point, for even if the world itself has always and will always exist, contingency remains.

Understanding contingency is enhanced if we have an explanation of the divide between necessity and contingency together with an account of the source of contingency. This point does not deny the possibility that no such explanations can be given. As is well-known, explanations always come to an end at some point, and we have no guarantee where such a stopping point will be found when it comes to contingency itself.

An enduring attraction of theism is its promise for generating such explanations, and here we can use Augustine's view as a model. [1] On it, all truth and all reality depend on God, with the divide between the necessary and the contingent explained in terms of the source of each, where the contingent depends on the divine will and the necessary depends on the operations of the divine mind. A continuation of this line of thought highlights not only these explanatory virtues, but also insists that this aspect is metatheologically fundamental. That is, when we begin to theorize about the nature of deity, where we must start is with sourcehood itself.

This beginning, however, is a mere promissory note at the outset, and redeeming it requires several metatheological steps that are in need of defense. Here I will explain these steps and show how they might be defended. As we will see, the lessons of such inquiry range far and wide, including implications for various non-traditional theisms which resist monotheism and the personhood of God, as well as those non-traditional views driven by mythical and speculative stories about the supernatural that we find especially in Gnostic traditions, but also in other traditions as well.

2. Some Ground Clearing

We began by distinguishing the necessary from the contingent, and a first step involves saying something about positions that threaten the distinction. One such view is necessitarianism, the view that there is no contingency to be found. Such a denial is difficult to sustain, and I won't take the detour that would be necessary for a full explo-

[1] First published in Augustine, **Eighty-Three Different Questions**, trans. David L. Moshe, Catholic University of America Press, Washington 1982.

ration of the evidence against this position. Doing so would take us too far afield, but a brief indication of why the view is unpromising will help motivate our discussion.

In short, it is hard to find an argument for the position that can't be rebutted fairly easily, and the obviousness of noting various possibilities that remain unrealized is strong evidence against it. Given some of the risky things I've done, it's lucky that I'm still alive; and I'm sure the same is true for many readers of this paper. Even for those less inclined to risky behavior, many of the things that have gone well might not have. These obvious facts present strong evidence against fatalism or necessitarianism, and can only be countered by impressive argumentation for the position. Regarding arguments for the position, many rely on the well-known scope fallacy that confuses, as the medievals termed it, the necessity of the consequence with the necessity of the consequent. [2] Others that do not commit this fallacy find ready rebuttal in, for example, Ockham's distinction between claims that are really about the past and claims that only appear to be about the past, showing that the mere fact of past truths about the future needn't pass on the necessity of the past to the claims about the future that are implied by these past truths. [3] Moreover, those that take a route that avoids these rebuttals, such as, [4] have highly refined premises linking power and logic that are suspicious at best. Taylor relies on the claim that you can't have the power to perform a given act if, at any time, some necessary condition is lacking for that act to occur. This claim is pretty clearly false, since right now my left arm is not elevated and yet I have the power to elevate it. Note, though, my lifting of my left arm requires that it is elevated, so Taylor's principle wrongly implies that I can't lift my left arm. To avoid such problems, Taylor's claim must be amended to read: you can't have the power to perform a given act when there is some necessary condition for the act to occur that you don't also have power over. Once this amendment is in place, Taylor's argument for fatalism fails.

Other variations on these themes are possible, of course, but the obviousness point above places severe strictures on what a successful variation must accomplish. The underlying story about the epistemic power of obviousness is a gloss on G.E. Moore's implicit methodology in rejecting skepticism. As I would put the point, that methodology

[2] See, e.g., the discussion in Alvin Plantinga, **The Nature of Necessity**, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1978.

[3] For discussion, see Joshua Hoffman and Gary Rosenkrantz, "Hard and Soft Facts", *Philosophical Review* 1984, Vol. 93, No. 3, pp. 419–434.

[4] See Richard Taylor, "Fatalism", *Philosophical Review* 1962, Vol. 71, No. 1, pp. 56–66, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2183681.

counsels never giving up the more obvious for the less obvious, so if it is utterly obvious that, for example, many species have reproductive capacities vastly surpassing the numbers they actually produce, there is an enormous burden on any attempt to find premises obvious enough to withstand Moorean scrutiny. Instead, such arguments provide efforts toward reflective equilibrium, trying to find alternative formulations of the premises used in arguments for fatalism that fit with what's obvious and thus no longer entail fatalism.

It is for these reasons that I shelve denials of contingency in our context. It is worth noting as well, especially for those familiar with recent work in modal metaphysics, that the necessitarian view being shelved here isn't the same as the necessitism defended recently by Timothy Williamson. His view severs semantics and ontology, maintaining that whatever exists does so necessarily, even though some claims are still only contingently true. He defends this position in, [5] and there may be a precursor of the view in Wittgenstein's **Tractatus**, though he seems unaware of this connection. [6] Williamson's work is more indebted to the work of Ruth Barcan Marcus, though not to her early work on modal logic in, [7] where first-order model theory is extended to intensional contexts in a way that relies on a fixed domain in the model theory, as we find standard extensional first-order logic. Instead, it is in the proofs of the Barcan formulas where we find the philosophical underpinning for Williamson's necessitism, and this basis has more probative value, given that these formulas can be proven in standard quantified modal logic without the fixed-domain assumption found in Marcus's earlier work. [8]

The fact that this view separates semantics and ontology is a drawback, however, for even if we shouldn't endorse the strong truthmaker thesis that every truth has a truthmaker, the link between truth and being defended in, for example, [9] remains attractive. On that position, even if there are truths that lack truthmakers, truth nonetheless

[5] See Timothy Williamson, **Modal Logic as Metaphysics**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013.

[6] The implication is pointed out in Frank Ramsey's review of the book, Frank P. Ramsey, "Critical Notice of L. Wittgenstein's **Tractatus logico-philosophicus**", *Mind* 1923, Vol. 32, No. 128, pp. 465–478, and he treats the implication as one of the two main problems he sees with the work.

[7] See Ruth Barcan Marcus, "Modalities and Intensional Languages", *Synthese* 1961, Vol. 13, No. 4, pp. 303–322.

[8] For excellent discussion of the Barcan Formulas and the challenge they present, see Christopher Menzel, "The Possibilism-Actualism Debate", in: Edward N. Zalta (ed.), **The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy**, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, https://tiny.pl/nn4fr9s2.

[9] See David Lewis, "Truthmaking and Difference-Making", *Noûs* 2001, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 602–615.

supervenes on being, so that if you fix the ontology, you can't find differences in what is true and what is false. If necessitism is true, however, this claim has to be abandoned, as Williamson is well aware, but doing so is a high theoretical price to pay. Williamson aims to deflect the criticism by replacing the distinction between the actual and the possible with a distinction between the concrete and the abstract, though it is worth mentioning that there are problems with such a replacement. [10]

In any case, necessitism, unlike necessitarianism, embraces the distinction between necessity and contingency, even if it restricts the distinction to the semantic realm alone. Here I'll ignore this possibility as well, speaking in a way that presupposes such a distinction in both realms, but for fans of necessitism, it will be fairly easy to see how to rephrase the discussion to avoid this anti-necessitistic presupposition.

We begin, then, with a distinction between necessity and contingency, wondering about possible explanations of the distinction, both in terms of where to draw the line between the two and where to find the source of the latter. This latter issue is related to the question of why there is something rather than nothing, but I resist casting the issue this way. First, the question would need to be re-formulated, focusing on why there is something contingent at all, and even with this re-formulation, the question can mislead. For if contingency is real, it pervades all of modal space. That is, if necessitarianism is false, there is no possibility at all where contingency isn't present. At best, the only remaining shard of the question of why there is something rather than nothing would be ontological, asking why are there contingent beings instead of only necessary ones. In contrast to the simple beauty of the original question of why something rather than nothing, the replacement lacks aesthetic merit, so I prefer to cast our discussion in other terms, specifically in terms of the source of contingency itself.

Regarding the former concern, the issue about where the line is between the necessary and the contingent, an instructive approach is to look at an example that founders on it. The example is a particular version of Perfect Being Theology, where the Anselmian motto of a being greater than which cannot be conceived is the fundamental metatheological stance on the nature of deity. The version of this metatheology I will focus on is one where this approach aims to culminate in an ontological argument for the existence of God, and the way it does so is by taking collections of great-making

[10] As argued in Christopher Menzel, "In Defense of the Possibilism — Actualism Distinction", *Philosophical Studies* 2020, Vol. 177, No. 7, pp. 1971–1997, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/ s11098-019-01294-0.

properties and somehow contriving to append to at least some of them the modal dimension of being necessary if possible. Plantinga's formulation (The Nature of Necessity) is a example of such a position, where we first determine which great-making properties have intrinsic *maxima*, and then identify that collection as the set of maximal excellences. We then derive the modal dimension by moving from maximal excellence to maximal greatness, where the latter is a matter of displaying maximal excellence across all possible worlds. By extending excellence to all of modal space, the property of being necessary if possible comes into the picture, leaving the argument at the place where Leibnizian consideration begins, where the central issue is whether such a being is possible.

There is another difficulty for this position, however, beyond the one Leibniz addresses. For as argues, part of the possibility contention involves the logical consistency of all the maximal excellences, and it is a strained sort of atheism to deny the existence of God simply because all the maximal excellences might not be jointly realizable. [11] Why not conclude instead that any being a greater than which is inconceivable is simply not one who instantiates the entire collection of maximal excellences? So, Nagasawa counsels, if we want to follow the Anselmian path of Perfect Being Theology (PBT), we should simply find whatever total collection of great-making properties wins out when comparing all consistent collections of such properties, and endorse a version of PBT that adverts to this collection.

Suppose, then, that we try to address the Leibnizian concern about possibility by endorsing Nagasawa's top-down approach to Perfect Being Theology rather than Plantinga's bottom-up approach, still aiming for the view to culminate in an ontological argument for the existence of the greatest possible being. Such a view founders on a problem identified in, [12] and it concerns the modal maneuver of contriving to append being necessary if possible to collections of great-making properties. For the maneuver can't be made for all collections of great-making properties, on pain of a most ludicrous ontological profligacy if the ontological argument were to succeed. For we would then have a proof of the existence, not just of the greatest possible being, but also of the next closest competitor, and so on.

[11] See Yujin Nagasawa, **Maximal God: A New Defense of Perfect Being Theism**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

[12] See Michael J. Almeida, **The Metaphysics of Perfect Beings**, Routledge, Boston 2008.

This catastrophe is relevant in our context, since it raises the issue of how and where to draw the line between necessity and contingency. On the version of PBT just examined, we don't have a story about where to draw that line, and it is precisely because we don't that we can't distinguish between the collections of properties to which we can add the property of being necessary if possible and those to which we cannot add this property. It is obvious that, for any contingent being displaying some collection of great-making properties, no such modal property can be added to the collection, since contingency is essential to anything that has it. If we wish to put this point in terms of possible worlds, to be contingent is for there to be a world lacking that fact or object or state of affairs. And yet the space of worlds is invariable, so that no matter what world is actual, all the other worlds remain possible. So if *X* is contingent, there is no world in which it is necessary.

So to find collections of great-making properties to which the modal property of being necessary if possible could be appended, we'd already need a division between the necessary and the contingent so as to be able to defend the idea that the collection of great-making properties in question couldn't be displayed by anything contingent. The project is thus undermined by noting this point, for the idea was to establish the necessary existence of the greatest possible being by adding the modal property to a collection in place, whereas the truth of the matter is that the modal property can't be added at all except when we are already talking about a necessary being.

The lesson here is that a top-down version of PBT that aims to culminate in a successful ontological argument founders on a failure to address the issue of the divide between the necessary and the contingent. Moreover, there are no resources within PBT for addressing this issue, unlike what we find in the Augustinian viewpoint noted above. As a result, the hope of a successful ontological argument is under severe duress, leaving open the possibility that there is no consistent collection of great-making properties to which the modal dimension of being necessary if possible can be consistently added. The problem is not that such an argument is guaranteed to be unsound, but rather that the metatheological route taken to find such an argument suffers by giving no grounds for determining where the dividing line between necessity and contingency is to be found.

What remains, then, for PBT is the Plantingian bottom-up strategy for defining maximal greatness, or any version of PBT that abandons the hope for a successful ontologi-

cal argument, such as we find in. [13] Either such approach avoids the difficulty noted, even though neither approach tries to explain theistically the divide between the necessary and the contingent. These views are thus compatible both with the idea that there is a non-theistic explanation of the divide, as well as with the idea that no explanation is available or needed. The disappointment in such a view is only this: it can't generate a theistic understanding of the divide from its fundamental starting point.

In this way, PBT contrasts with Creator Theology (CT), for on the latter approach, at least in its Augustinian incarnation, we aim for a theistic account of the divide, as well as for a theistic account of the source of whatever contingency we find. In approaching these issues, we start by sorting explanations in terms of nature and supernature. Doing so places in front of us the question whether an explanation of contingency is a natural explanation or a supernatural one, and here we note the perplexity of looking for a fully natural explanation of contingency as well as of the divide between the contingent and the necessary. Instead of looking for such an explanation, a more fitting position for resisting supernatural explanations of each would be to deny the need for any explanation, as we find in Humean and other rejections of cosmological reasoning, especially the sort relying on some principle of sufficient reason. So our guiding assumption here will be what a supernatural explanation of contingency might look like, and this issue places us squarely within the domain of metatheology. In that domain, the central issue is how to begin thinking about deity, as well as how to sort what can adequately be categorized as a deity as opposed to some other type of supernatural being.

Since approaching this issue through a metatheological lens is rare, some discussion of this approach is warranted. Theology, as typically done, appears as a compendium of important truths about deity. In this way, it is unlike mature scientific theories that identify the fundamental principles and axioms from which the remainder of the theory is constructed. Newtonian physics is a classic example, but not the only one. Once we understand the theoretical nature of any theology, we are in a position to see the advantage of a metatheological approach that counsels identifying what is fundamental to the theory and what are the implications of what is fundamental. On some metatheological options, the link between God and an explanation of contingency becomes strained. We have seen a hint of this already, in the difficulties facing some versions of Perfect Being Theology, and the point of view I will be arguing for generalizes on this result, concluding that the issue of contingency gives us some ground for prefer-

[13] See Mark C. Murphy, **God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument From Evil**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

ring some metatheological options over others, and using this result to recommend Creator Theology over its competitors.

3. Metatheological Basics

The task of metatheology is to identify the best starting points for thinking about deity, for constructing a theology. On this issue, one initially promising beginning is to focus on responsibility for courses of affairs. One can see this idea in many ancient societies, where religious practices grow up around the non-natural beings thought to be responsible for how things work, from crop cycles to reproductive cycles to which sides in conflicts come out winners. The growth of these practices involves the central ideas of worship, where submission and surrender take center stage. Such practices can involve little more than practical self-interest, trying to curry favor with such beings in order for things to continue to go well in the future, but they may also involve a motivation that springs from normative recognition of the worthiness of some such beings for worship.

We thus find in this summary two distinct approaches to metatheology, one focusing on (causal) responsibility and sourcehood and the other focusing on worthiness for worship. At this beginning point, we encounter these approaches apart from extremes, not initially supposing that the category of deity requires sourcehood for all or that the worthiness in question is unparalleled. To reach such unbounded conceptions, further reasoning is required, and we can find such reasoning in the Socratic response to the Problem of the Pantheon. Accusations of atheism arise from Socrates's rejection of popular religion because they involved attributions of deity to beings whose behavior fell well below the dignity required of deity. Once imperfections and improprieties begin to be eliminated, however, it is easy to see the endpoint of such reasoning in terms of illimitable worthiness for worship and unbounded responsibility for all things.

Those familiar with the history of philosophical theology will notice that our two metatheological starting points leave out Anselmian PBT. As I argued in, [14] this metatheology can be subsumed under that of unsurpassable worthiness for worship, on the Socratic grounds noted above. For supreme worthiness of worship conflicts with imperfections and improprieties of the sort that lead to the Problem of the Pantheon. So

[14] See Jonathan L. Kvanvig, **Depicting Deity: A Metatheological Approach,** Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021.

perfection of being isn't absent from our starting points, but is instead subsumed under it in a way that makes perfection in being derivative when compared with these more fundamental approaches.

Anselmians will perhaps resist, insisting on a place at the table by claiming to be able to derive worthiness for worship from perfection in being. Consider Tom Morris's attempt:

> Worship-worthiness, for example, can be held to supervene upon, or to consist in, some of the properties ingredient in perfection. The idea of worship-worthiness can thus be subsumed within the idea of perfection, which can in turn act as a guide to our understanding of the conditions of proper worship, the characteristics required for a being to merit this ultimate attitude and treatment. [15]

Morris's attempt involves an appeal either to supervenience or constitution, and of the two, the latter is the least promising. Both the perfections and worthiness for worship are properties, and constitution is most naturally thought of in terms of a relation between an object and its parts arranged in the right way. Thus, a statue can be constituted by clay, arranged in the right way; a highway by asphalt laid down properly. More promising, perhaps, is the notion of supervenience, but it too has troubles of its own. Among the myriad ideas about supervenience, the one most promising is one that involves one-way entailment plus explanatory priority, as when naturalists in ethics hold that moral truths supervene on natural facts. Yet, worthiness for worship is supposed to be so strong as to generate an obligation for worship on each of our parts, and it is notoriously difficult to show that the theory of obligation is entailed by natural facts even together with the theory of value that includes which properties count as perfections.

A more plausible story about the relation between perfection in being and worthiness of worship goes the other way, by appeal to the idea of grounding. I'm not endorsing this position, for the notion of grounding is itself a vexed one, [16] Yet, if we rely on the notion of grounding, the direction of metaphysical explanation runs in the other direction: worthiness of worship is grounded in the perfections, not the other way around. In light of this point, it is best to see perfection in being as derived from wor-

[15] Thomas Morris, "Perfect Being Theology", *Noûs* 1987, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 24 [19–30].

[16] I have found the work of Jessica Wilson most helpful on this point. See, e.g., Jessica M. Wilson, "Nonlinearity and Metaphysical Emergence", in: Stephen Mumford and Matthew Tugby (eds.), **Metaphysics and Science,** Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, pp. 201–231 and Jessica M. Wilson, "No Work for a Theory of Grounding", *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 2014, Vol. 57, No. 5–6, pp. 535–579.

thiness of worship. Metaphysical fundamentality isn't required of grounding properties, however, and a classic example of this is found in Williamson's knowledge-first epistemology. [17] Williamson holds that knowledge is fundamental in epistemology, incapable of analysis by any of its component parts. That position allows, however, that knowledge is grounded in, for example, belief, justification, and truth. It is just that these latter elements are not fundamental in spite of being the ground for what is fundamental. So, in our context, the application of these points is that if perfection in being is a ground of worthiness for worship, then it is derivable from a worship-worthiness metatheology, and since this point leaves open whether a derivation is possible in the other direction, we find no basis for thinking that worthiness for worship is derivable from perfection in being. Hence, in what follows, I'll focus on the options of sourcehood and worthiness for worship in the search for what is metatheologically fundamental.

To return, then, to the main thread of our discussion, we re-focus our attention on the endpoints of these approaches, noting the Socratic argument in favor of accounts of deity that require unbounded sourcehood and unlimited worthiness for worship. This Socratic response to the Problem of the Pantheon also motivates a preference for monotheism, for part of the problem involves conflict among deities and who comes out the winner when conflict occurs. One way to characterize this issue is in terms of the distinction between deities and other supernatural divinities. Deities are, of course, divine beings, but there is no need to require that any divine being is a deity. Doing so will simplify our theology, and avoid at least part of the Problem of the Pantheon, for if there is one being who rules over all others, whose will prevails when there are conflicts of will, it is only that being that might count as a deity. The others might be divine beings, they might be vicegerents who operate under the authority of a more supreme being, and so are not to be counted as deities.

This idea of supremacy for deity does not by itself guarantee the truth of monotheism, though it is a familiar trope in philosophical theology to try to derive monotheism from various properties possessed unboundedly. The most common is that of power, where omnipotence is limitless power. I won't pursue this issue at any length here, but I don't think these arguments succeed. The general idea is to imagine two candidates for omnipotence and ask what happens when conflict occurs. Such arguments presume that such conflict is possible, however, and if two are in necessary

[17] See Timothy Williamson, **Knowledge and Its Limits**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000.

accord of heart, mind, and will, the imagined situation of conflict simply cannot arise, and so no such possibility can be used to show that at most only one of the beings could be a supreme being of the sort required of deity.

Even without a full derivation of monotheism from Socratic reasoning, the idea of supremacy yields a preference for monotheism, for having no equals clearly guarantees supremacy. So if either of our two initial approaches in metatheology can sustain monotheism, that would be a mark in their favor. Even though our focus here is on the issue of contingency itself, and its probative value in support of Creator Theology, it is worth noting in passing that the issue of monotheism also fits most naturally with Creator Theology. For if God is fundamentally the source of all else, monotheism follows immediately, whereas if God is fundamentally deserving of the highest and best worship, monotheism does not follow immediately. So we have one small mark in favor of Creator Theology, and our goal is to show that the topic of contingency adds to our evidence in favor of the view.

Recall that there are two issues surrounding this topic of contingency. One of them is the familiar issue raised in cosmological arguments, where we are looking for an explanation of what there is. Here, though, we'll consider this issue in a way that is orthogonal to such approaches, for the issue here is not whether contingency itself provides the basis for a successful cosmological reasoning to a theistic conclusion. Instead, the issue we are addressing concerns the topic of contingency and the various possible approaches to metatheology. This issue could end up supporting Creator Theology even if all versions of cosmological reasoning are inadequate in one way or another, just as Perfect Being Theology can be developed in a way that doesn't depend on the success of the ontological argument. So let us turn to the topic of contingency to see how Creator Theology addresses it, in comparison with Worthiness of Worship Theology and the implied perfection in being that it grounds.

4. Which Kind of Explanation Could be Adequate?

The central idea of Creator Theology is that whatever contingency involves, it is sourced in God in terms of acts of the divine will. This personal version of Creator Theology can be, and has been, resisted by impersonal conceptions of God, so the first step in defending the more dominant tradition involves explaining why personal version of the position are preferable. The central argument for a personal conception here involves the fine-grainedness of the created product, one with the kind of maximal

specificity that makes the created order count as the actualization of exactly one (abstract) possible world. If we encode this relationship between creator and product in the schematic language of metaphysical laws, articulated by, [18] we find an ordered triple of <*Source, Link, Product*>. If the source is an impersonal deity, we face the mystery of what exactly it is about this source that yields such a precise, fine-grained product, but if the source is a personal deity, sourcing contingency by acts of divine will, we find the mystery resolved in terms of the fine-grained intentions involved in such acts of will. It is not enough of an explanation to merely cite a source of sufficient power to generate a result, for a full explanation needs to cite the features of that power that lead to the precise consequences noted. Personal versions have something to say here, whereas impersonal versions leave the matter a mystery. [19]

But what of the divide between contigency and necessity? Here a personal account of the nature of God has resources as well that impersonal accounts lack. For central to personhood is the divide between mind and will, between cognition and conation. It is this feature that undergirds the Augustinian idea of explaining necessity in terms of the operations of the Divine mind and contingency in terms of Divine volition.

Such an approach leads immediately to a central difficulty for such a position, for if necessity depends on the operations of the Divine mind and God is free to think and do in a variety of different ways, don't we end up having to endorse Cartesian voluntarism about necessity? In other words, don't we end up having to endorse the idea that what is necessary is only contingently so and might have been otherwise? After all, doesn't it seem true that God's patterns of thought might have been different from what they actually are.

The modal catastrophe that follows from such a voluntarism is well-known, and though there may be paths to pursue to avoid it by rejecting standard S5 formalizations, here I'll assume that the catastrophe is real. For if p is necessary, but only contingently so, then it is possible that p isn't necessary (by the definition of contingency). The catastrophe is just a short step away, involving endorsing the standard dual rules for possibility and necessity, undergirding the implication from "possibly not necessary" to "not necessarily necessary". Yet, by the S4 axiom, anything necessary is necessarily neces-

[18] See Jonathan Schaffer, "Laws for Metaphysical Explanation", *Philosophical Issues* 2017, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 302–321.

[19] Further elaboration of this point can be found in Kvanvig, **Depicting Deity…**, pp. 73–95.

sary, so if p is necessary, it is also necessarily necessary, contradicting the central implication of Cartesian voluntarism just noted.

Rather than tinker with the underlying modal logic so as to make voluntarism palatable, the best strategy for Augustinianism here is to deflect by appeal to distinctions among types of necessities. These include metaphysical necessity, logical necessity, moral necessity, accidental necessity, and epistemic necessity, to name a few. There are others as well, but these are sufficient for present purposes, for included in this list is the distinction between metaphysical and epistemic necessities. The precise character of epistemic necessity and possibility is a vexed issue, but the central idea involved is that epistemic possibility can vary over time as one's informational resources change. The initial idea concerned what is left undecided by a given body of knowledge, making epistemic possibility the dual of what is known to be true: something is epistemically possible if and only if its denial is not known to be true. Other proposals have been offered since this initial proposal in, [20] but the crucial idea they all endorse is the variability across time just noted. So I can correctly note that my department chair might be in his office when I first arrive on campus, but after seeing him at the coffee shop in the next building over, I then rightly endorse the claim that he can't be in his office. The relativity of these modal claims to background information shows that the modality in question is epistemic rather than metaphysical.

This distinction is central to understanding how one can endorse the idea that God's thought processes might have been different, without endorsing catastrophic Cartesian voluntarism. For we have no infallible *a priori* insight into the structural features involved in Divine cognition, and so we investigate in the same ways we investigate other unknowns. In the process, we come up with hypotheses and properly endorse the epistemic possibility that things might be otherwise. One of the lessons of

[20] See Jaakko Hintikka, **Knowledge and Belief**, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1962. For additional discussion of and resistance to the standard account, see Keith DeRose, "Epistemic Possibilities", *Philosophical Review* 1991, Vol. 100, No. 4, pp. 581–605; Andy Egan and B. Weatherson, **Epistemic Modality**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009; James H. Fetzer, "On »Epistemic Possibility«", *Philosophia* 1974, Vol. 4, No. 2–3, pp. 327–335; Michael Huemer, "Epistemic Possibility", *Synthese* 2007, Vol. 156, No. 1, pp. 119 –142; Joshua Knobe and Yalcin Seth, "Epistemic Modals and Context: Experimental Data", *Semantics and Pragmatics* 2014, Vol. 7, No. 10, pp. 1–21; Baron Reed, "Fallibilism, Epistemic Possibility, and Epistemic Agency", *Philosophical Issues* 2013, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 40–69; Roy Sorensen, "Meta-Agnosticism: Higher Order Epistemic Possibility", *Mind* 2009, Vol. 118, No. 471, pp. 777–784; Paul Teller, "Epistemic Possibility", *Philosophia* 1972, Vol. 2, No. 4, pp. 303–320; Paul Teller, "Professor Fetzer on Epistemic Possibility", *Philosophia* 1974, Vol. 4, No. 2–3, pp. 337–338 and Seth Yalcin, "Epistemic Modals", *Mind* 2007, Vol. 116, No. 464, pp. 983–1026; Seth Yalcin, "More on Epistemic Modals", *Mind* 2009, Vol. 118, No. 471, pp. 785–793.

modal metaphysics, however, is that what is epistemically possibility can be metaphysically impossible, and the conclusion to draw from the catastrophic implication of Cartesian voluntarism is that whatever the structural features are of Divine cognition, they have to be metaphysically necessary even though they are not epistemically necessary for non-omniscient beings like us.

So this initial difficulty facing a full endorsement of an Augustinian version of Creator Theology is disarmed by this distinction. What remains, then, is the hard work of identifying the structural patterns involved in Divine cognition, for we should not opt for the superficial view that identifies metaphysical necessities in terms of items in the store of divine knowledge. It is, of course, true that any omniscient being will know which truths are necessary and which are not, but no such claim can give the needed explanation of the source of necessity. Instead, the Augustinian approach should focus on structural patterns in Divine cognition, using them to identify what can and can't vary across different topics and contexts of thought. In doing so, the philosophical theologian will be mirroring the behavior of the philosophical logician who elicits logical rules and principles by attending to what doesn't vary by topic and context when it comes to patterns of reasoning.

This attention to universality should not be thought to reduce modality to universality, [21] for it is the beginning point for philosophical logic, not its essence. What else is involved is the subject matter for philosophy of logic, and we cannot settle such questions here. What is worth noting, though, is the way in which a substantive philosophy of logic provides the needed model for an Augustinian version of Creator Theology. For when one questions how to determine the structural patterns found in the mind of God, one can use the model of a substantive philosophy of logic to describe how the process works and how we determine which universal patterns are necessities and which are mere universalities.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me note that adopting such a model does not imply that any commitment to the idea that metaphysical necessities will all turn out to be logical necessities. The point of the model is methodological only: it gives us a way to start our inquiry. As we proceed, we might come to the point of thinking that there is to be found the One True Logic that encodes the entire domain of necessity. For those of us

[21] For such a view, see Bertrand Russell, "Possibility and Necessity", in: Alasdair Urquhart and Albert C. Lewis (eds.), **The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Volume 4: Foundations of Logic, 1903–1905**, Routledge, Boston 1994, pp. 507–521.

skeptical there is such a thing, our logical inquiry will need to be supplemented with metaphysical inquiry, informed by our best philosophical theology where relevant as well.

5. Conclusion

This approach leaves open the skeptical response that all of this could be done while endorsing atheism, and nothing I've said undermines that response. But such a response misses the point of the discussion. For the idea here isn't to defend the existence of God, but to show the explanatory resources that some accounts of the nature of God have that others do not. The value of the investigation, then, is to come up with ways to evaluate which metaphysical approaches to the nature of God are superior to others, and explanatory reach is one such way to evaluate competitor approaches.

The conclusion to draw, then, is not to claim that there can't be any non-theistic understanding of necessity, but instead to claim that among theistic approaches, a version of Creator Theology that is personal in nature has advantages over impersonal versions of Creator Theology as well as over other approaches to fundamental theology. These alternatives to Creator Theology include the Anselmian idea of perfection of being as well as those approaches beginning from the idea of worthiness for worship. Regardless of one's level of attraction for these alternatives to Creator Theology, the point to note is that a proper understanding of contingency arises from Creator Theology, in contrast to these other approaches, and that such an understanding is at the core of what a complete philosophical understanding involves.

Jonathan L. Kvanvig

References

1. Almeida Michael J., **The Metaphysics of Perfect Beings**, Routledge, Boston 2008.
2. Augustine, **Eighty-Three Different Questions**, Catholic University of America Press, trans. David L. Moshe, Washington 1982.
3. DeRose Keith, "Epistemic Possibilities", *Philosophical Review* 1991, Vol. 100, No. 4, pp. 581–605.
4. Egan Andy and Weatherson B., **Epistemic Modality**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009.

5. Fetzer James H., "On »Epistemic Possibility«", *Philosophia* 1974, Vol. 4, No. 2–3, pp. 327–335.

6. Hintikka Jaakko, **Knowledge and Belief**, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1962.

7. Hoffman Joshua and Rosenkrantz Gary, "Hard and Soft Facts", *Philosophical Review* 1984, Vol. 93, No. 3, pp. 419–434.

8. Huemer Michael, "Epistemic Possibility", *Synthese* 2007, Vol. 156, No. 1, pp. 119 –142. Knobe Joshua and Seth Yalcin, "Epistemic Modals and Context: Experimental Data", *Semantics and Pragmatics* 2014, Vol. 7, No. 10, pp. 1–21.

9. Kvanvig Jonathan L., **Depicting Deity: A Metatheological Approach,** Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021.

10. Lewis David, "Truthmaking and Difference-Making", *Noûs* 2001, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 602–615.

11. Marcus Ruth Barcan, "Modalities and Intensional Languages", *Synthese* 1961, Vol. 13, No. 4, pp. 303–322.

12. Menzel Christopher, "The Possibilism-Actualism Debate", in: Edward N. Zalta (ed.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, https://tiny.pl/nn4fr9s2.

13. Menzel Christopher, "In Defense of the Possibilism — Actualism Distinction", *Philosophical Studies* 2020, Vol. 177, No. 7, pp. 1971–1997, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/ s11098-019-01294-0.

14. Morris Thomas, "Perfect Being Theology", *Noûs* 1987, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 24 [19–30].

15. Murphy Mark C., **God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument From Evil**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

16. Nagasawa Yujin, **Maximal God: A New Defense of Perfect Being Theism**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

17. Plantinga Alvin, **The Nature of Necessity**, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1978.

18. Ramsey Frank P., "Critical Notice of L. Wittgenstein's **Tractatus logico-philosophicus**", *Mind* 1923, Vol. 32, No. 128, pp. 465–478.

19. Reed Baron, "Fallibilism, Epistemic Possibility, and Epistemic Agency", *Philosophical Issues* 2013, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 40–69.

20. Russell Bertrand, "Possibility and Necessity", in: Alasdair Urquhart and Albert C. Lewis (eds.), **The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Volume 4: Foundations of Logic, 1903–1905**, Routledge, Boston 1994, pp. 507–521.

21. Schaffer Jonathan, "Laws for Metaphysical Explanation", *Philosophical Issues* 2017, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 302–321.

22. Sorensen Roy, “Meta-Agnosticism: Higher Order Epistemic Possibility”, Mind 2009, Vol. 118, No. 471, pp. 777–784.

23. Taylor Richard, “Fatalism”, Philosophical Review 1962, Vol. 71, No. 1, pp. 56–66, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2183681.

24. Teller Paul, “Epistemic Possibility”, Philosophia 1972, Vol. 2, No. 4, pp. 303–320.

25. Teller Paul, “Professor Fetzer on Epistemic Possibility”, Philosophia 1974, Vol. 4, No. 2–3, pp. 337–338.

26. Williamson Timothy, Knowledge and Its Limits, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000.

27. Williamson Timothy, Modal Logic as Metaphysics, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013.

28. Wilson Jessica M., “Nonlinearity and Metaphysical Emergence”, in: Stephen Mumford and Matthew Tugby (eds.), Metaphysics and Science, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, pp. 201–231.

29. Wilson Jessica M., “No Work for a Theory of Grounding”, Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy 2014, Vol. 57, No. 5–6, pp. 535–579.

30. Yalcin Seth, “Epistemic Modals”, Mind 2007, Vol. 116, No. 464, pp. 983–1026.

31. Yalcin Seth, “More on Epistemic Modals”, Mind 2009, Vol. 118, No. 471, pp. 785–793.