

Aristotle and Averroes: The Problem of Necessity and Contingency

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Starting with Husserl

In Part I., Chapter 1, Section 2 of *Ideas*, Husserl raises the intriguing topic of the inseparability of fact and essence. Quite apart from what Husserl may have meant by his brilliant discussion, e.g., contingency possesses an essential character, from the point of view of the present, respective article, the existent actuality of fact is a pure contingency. This may indeed be what Husserl means when he says that, '... every fact could be "essentially" other than it is.' But the discussion of this article takes its rise from being stimulated by the raising of this topic and is not necessarily devoted to following Husserl's direction.

From the point of view of this present, respective article, there is no necessity that the existent fact (apart from its being known as a "fact") requires the existence of essence. By fact what is meant here is simply contingent existence whether known, knowable, unknown or unknowable. If one meant by fact a state of affairs which was known to be "a fact", of course a scientific theory of truth would already be assumed and for such a factual existence, essence would already be presupposed. However, in the sense of fact employed here, in the sense of pure facticity apart from any knowledge claim, there is no requirement of essence.

Nevertheless, there is another sense in which there is an inseparability of fact and essence and that is in the domain of essential facts. If one speaks of an essential fact one is referring to a fact which is datum of necessary knowledge. When one speaks of mathematical truths of a certain variety, one may refer to such truths as essential facts. Such essential facts possess the status both of being necessary truths and of being part of the structuredness of the universe and thus as being metaphysically necessary.

If essence is unknown, then it cannot be said that there is a fact of essence. An essence cannot become a fact unless it is known and then and only then is it proper

to speak of the fact of essence. Hence, there is no inseparability of fact and essence when one refers to essential facts. It is only that once an essence is known it becomes a fact of essence.

The state of facticity is pure contingency. But it does not follow from this that contingency is necessary. In the case of essence, there is no necessity of the existence of fact. Essence *qua* essence does not require factuality for its existence. It may be that such an essence would be unknown and unknowable, but it does not follow that thereby it would be void of reality. It might be that it would be impossible for it to be comprehensible as existing, but this only means that the category of existence is inappropriate for its description. Factuality, in the sense of existence, does not require essence for its being; essence in the sense of its own nature does not require factuality for its being. Factuality and essence, therefore, are independent from each other, although not epistemologically separable.

Knowing the World

An interesting route through epistemology can be constructed by which one can safely travel to the destination of metaphysics. While it is the persuasion of this philosopher that there is no strong interest in "proving" the existence of the external world, it is the duty of the philosopher not to shirk from recognizing the implications of her or his discoveries. In the process of knowing truths, one can become aware of the distinction between different kinds of truths, as for example, between necessary truths and contingent truths. Further, one can become aware of the apodeicticity and universality of the distinction between necessary and contingent truths. The question then arises, as it did, for different reasons, for Averroes in relation to Aristotle, when one becomes aware of the distinction between necessity and contingency, does it follow that such a distinction would not have been possible unless one were already aware of contingency and therefore that one's awareness of the essential nature of truth would not have been possible if one did not at first possess the ingredient of the contingent nature of truth, an ingredient which could not have arisen from the realm of essence at all? In other words, in order to have become aware of necessity as necessity one would have to have been aware of contingency. Thus, an awareness of necessity necessitates an awareness of contingency. But contingency could not have arisen from the realm of necessity. If contingency were already part of that which was necessary, it would not be contingent. Therefore, it would be necessary that contingency exist in its own separate, ontological realm. It would not follow that for necessary existence to exist, contingent existence would have to exist. It would only follow that for one to become aware of necessary existence, contingent existence would have to exist. For Averroes, the G-d of Aristotle could not know its own nature without knowing the world, despite Aristotle's claims to the contrary. For Averroes, Aristotle's G-d could not know itself as the cause of the world without thereby knowing the world of which it was the cause. Therefore, for Averroes, Aristotle's G-d could not know just itself alone.

The question can then be raised here, given the starting point of pure consciousness: can one know only the necessary truths of essence? Whether or not the world exists is outside of the realm of necessary truth and thus outside of the scope of the concern of the phenomenologist proper. It does not follow from this that the world either exists or does not exist; it merely follows that it is not a subject about which a pure phenomenologist has anything to say. The question nonetheless remains, even if were to be the case that the philosopher, *qua* pure phenomenologist, possesses no interest in proving the existence of the world, can the philosopher *qua* metaphysician or epistemologist contemplate essence *qua* essence without presupposing the world of contingency?

For example, when contemplating the truths of essence, it is of interest to note that one truth of essence is that the necessity of the truth of essence is different from the contingency of the truth of fact and that the difference between the two types of truth is itself a distinction that is necessarily true. (If the realm of contingent fact were to become transmogrified into a realm of essence, the distinction between the two realms would still be true in principle although it might be a distinction, which was unknown and unknowable).

Two questions present themselves. Firstly, what implications follow concerning the existence of the world from the fact that a relationship of two realms of truth is known as an essent when one of the terms of the relationship is a term which refers to the contingent world? Secondly, is it of any significance that the idea of necessary essence itself, the could not be otherwiseness of essential truth might not be noticeable if it were not for the fact that it could be contrasted with the kind of truth that could be otherwise? The very possibility of noticing an epistemological distinction would depend in this case on the ontological existence of the world.

These two very absorbing implications deserve to be further analyzed for the sake of drawing out further consequences. With regard to the first implication, does it make a difference in the concept of a proof of the existence of the world if a necessary truth can be known concerning a relationship of distinction between levels of truth when one level of the distinction is obtained from a knowledge of the world? There is a certain similarity as noted above in this problem with the difficulty Averroes noted in Aristotle's conception of G-d. If the very knowledge of one kind of essence requires contingent existence, can it still be said that contingent existence falls completely outside of the realm of phenomenological interest? Further, can it be said that this offers no sign at all of the proof of the world's existence? If necessary truth cannot be known without a contrast to contingent truth, does this not in and of itself constitute a proof of the external world? Can it be that a proof of the existence of the external world has been constructed despite of, nay, because of, the insistence of the purity of the phenomenological standpoint?

From the fact that a truth can be known with necessity to be true wherein a part of the content which is known about is not a necessary truth of essence, it does not follow that that part of the content which is known about must exist. It would only

follow that in order to know that which is necessary to be necessary that the contingent would have to exist. But there is no necessity in knowing the necessary to be necessary.

Could it not be said that the entire distinction between necessary truth and contingent truth is itself a necessary truth of a distinction which can be drawn in the realm of essence alone without reference to the realm of actual existence? For the concept of necessary truth can be necessarily distinguished from the concept of contingent truth whether or not contingent truth possesses any valid ontological status. Could not contingent truth exist as a mere possibility? Or could not contingent existence exist as an illusory possibility?

The world could be an illusion and not even known to be possibly an illusion, and still function as an appearance of contingency, or false contingency. The world could thus serve as an apparent other to necessity so as to permit the drawing of a distinction, which is known as necessarily true without it having to be the case that the world would truly have to exist contingently. The contingent status of the world could be an illusion. Consciousness itself may be masquerading as contingency. The false appearance of a contingent world would suffice as a condition for the possibility of drawing a distinction between necessity and contingency.

Nevertheless, it appears that the necessity with which the distinction between necessity and contingency is known to exist would be dependent upon the *possibility* of the existence of the contingent world and therefore at the very least it would have been established that that it is necessary that the world possess at least a possible existence. In it is possible that the world exists either as a real or as a fraudulent contingency. But to say that it is necessary that it is possible that the world exists is the same as it is to say that the world may or may not exist; it does not follow that the world exists. Thus, one more, one finds oneself back where one started. The existence of the world cannot be known with necessity. A small difference, however, can be noted. It cannot be said that the possible existence of the world falls entirely outside of the philosopher's province of knowledge. It must now be said that at the very least it is true that in order that knowledge of the distinction between necessary existence and contingent existence is possible, the possible existence of the world must be taken into consideration. While this may seem to be a very small difference, it is a difference and what is true, however tiny its truth value, must not be ignored.

Is it the case that the very concept of necessary existence itself could not be noticed without the ontological existence of contingency? If contingency were not actual, then how could one become aware of a truth that could not be otherwise? One could not become aware of 'cannot be otherwiseness' without the existence of 'otherwiseness'. Since one is aware of 'cannot cannot be otherwiseness', does it not then follow that contingent actuality necessarily exists? This argument is seemingly a very powerful one. Is it possible that at last an argument has been devised which proves the existence of the external world? This would be ironic indeed coming at

the hands of a philosopher who seemingly could care less whether or not the world existed or whether a proof could be devised which proved either that the world existed or did not exist. Nonetheless, it would remain true that the proof that the world either existed or did not exist would not be of great importance to the philosopher since such an existence would remain purely contingent and the realm of contingent truth possesses only limited interest for the philosopher.

However, given this above qualification, is it not true that a proof of the existence of the external world has been devised in spite of the philosopher's reluctance and disinterest in offering such a proof or perhaps precisely because of the reluctance and disinterest that such a proof has at last become possible to devise? Unfortunately, while such a proof as the above may be the best proof philosophers have been able to devise, it is not itself foolproof. For, it may be possible, quite apart from the possibility of "false contingency", to think of essence without contingency. The problem is, it is not knowable if it is possible to think of essence without contingent existence because the world in which the philosopher thinks already includes contingent existence. Thus, it is not knowable if necessity can be cognized on its own without contingent existence because the experimental thinking conditions are unavailable. That it appears that 'cannot be otherwiseness' cannot be thought without 'otherwiseness' is only true in the world in which one finds oneself existing; it is not knowable or known if 'cannot be otherwiseness' would be capable of being known if 'otherwiseness' were not known since this data base is unavailable to the philosopher. Therefore, while it may be true that necessity cannot be thought without the actuality of contingency, it is a truth that cannot be known.

Nevertheless, if one were to disregard the argument from the inaccessibility of a world free from contingency, and pay attention once more to the fact that the awareness of consciousness is a necessary awareness, the question arises, if one must in the world that exists, presuppose the existence of contingency in order to become aware of necessity qua necessity, is one not then aware of something other than the existence of consciousness? Is this not a proof of an external world? It appears to be a proof of the existence of something other than consciousness.

If awareness of consciousness is possible as an awareness of certain truth, how can one be aware of the status of certainty, unless it is possible to contrast this certainty with that which is not certain? According to this argument, knowledge of necessity requires knowledge of contingency. It seems to follow, then, that the certain knowledge of consciousness necessarily implies the certain knowledge of something other than consciousness. While it may be that this something other than consciousness cannot be characterized as 'other minds' or an 'external world', it remains true that it seems that a proof of something other than consciousness as existent has been provided. This something 'other than consciousness' cannot, however, be a phenomenological content and hence this proof if indeed it is a proof, is not a phenomenological proof.

Since the content of what is other than consciousness is always subject to the

possibility of being an illusion, in the final analysis, the most basic starting point must be the state of consciousness as it arises as a necessary cognition. Most contemporary philosophers shy away from this starting point or even find it to be an embarrassment, but this is a starting point, which cannot be avoided and is avoided only with the consequence of the subsequent impoverishment of all further thought.

Unlike the more ancient and more mature Indian philosophy, in the West, with the major exception of Descartes, the starting point of the necessity of consciousness has been vastly underutilized. By not having paid more attention to this starting point, philosophy's progress in the West has been severely retarded. Indeed, the directions which Western philosophy have taken have been wrongheaded and since they have been so multifarious and have occupied so many fine minds, the amount of regress has been astonishingly wasteful. One is reminded of Aquinas' remark in *On Being and Essence*, that, 'A small mistake in the beginning is a big mistake in the end.' Here, a big mistake in the beginning is a giant mistake in the end.

Philosophy must be returned to its starting point. How and why can any rigorous philosopher, in good conscience, leave this starting point or neglect its widespread consequences? The question which is raised is, is the necessary truth of consciousness the only truth of which one may be certain?¹ Is Descartes correct in maintaining that all other essential truths may be the products of a malicious daemon? Whether we are waking or dreaming is not the essential question as the illusion of essence can occur in either realm. The entire distinction between the waking and the dream state may itself be an illusion - it could be that there is no such distinction at all - both waking and sleeping can be equally illusory states when compared against a third state, which in Indian Vedantic philosophy is known as deep sleep, or pure consciousness, or *Turiya*. With a third reference point, the entire waking-dream debate can be seen to be a pseudo-conflict. However, it is a useful one since it is a harbinger of a more serious question, which is, if both waking and sleeping are equally unreal, then what is reality?²

While the world and the truths of inner consciousness are both realities which are subject to question, what is unquestionable is that a reality exists which has the nature of consciousness. Can it be said that the features of reality can be read, although indistinctly, in the mirror provided by consciousness? If consciousness is the only certain reality, then it is arguable that the products of consciousness can be relied upon as clues to the nature of reality. But is it true that consciousness itself is the only certain reality? Is the starting point provided by Descartes a sufficient starting point? Or, is it possible that the starting point for philosophy can be expanded?

For Descartes, any necessary essence, with the exception of the primary essence of consciousness, can be a product of a deceiver. Insofar as one is conscious, however, one can be aware of a possible deception regarding necessary essences. Of course, while it is possible that an omnipresent and omnipotent deceiver exists, it is not necessary to assume that an omnipresent and omnipotent deceiver exists by the mere virtue of its possibility. But the possibility of such an existence must not sim-

ply be ignored or discounted.³ As Newton once remarked, he could see as far as he could because he was standing on the shoulders of giants. One must summon up the courage to mount Descartes' shoulders. Even if such an omnipresent and omnipotent deceiver exists, what Descartes has established is that a consciousness exists which is not dubitable (this is not to be confused with empirical consciousness of existent human beings).

It is the task of the philosophy of the present and of the future to expand the list of necessarily known truths beyond the single known truth of consciousness. To borrow Descartes' device of the deceiving daemon, it can always be alleged that all necessary truths are but fraudulent clues left behind by the deceiving daemon. But it must be said that if everything is an illusion, then one still has to understand that. If this understanding is also an illusion, then it is meaningless to assert that everything is an illusion. At the very least, it is meaningful only to assert that everything apart from the understanding that everything is an illusion is an illusion. If one such understanding is possible, then at least one thing is true: it is true that it can be understood that everything except one's understanding that everything is an illusion is an illusion. Can it then be said that there is only one truth that can be understood?

Without calling in the hypothesis of the good Deity, it is not only true that there is only one thing that one cannot be mistaken about (e.g., the existence of consciousness). In fact, it is impossible that only one thing can be known to be true. If one analyzes the claim that one can only understand that every seeming truth apart from one's understanding that everything is an illusion, is an illusion, on the contrary, one can generate an indefinite number of certainties: (i) it is true that one understands that consciousness exists; (ii) it is true that one understands that it is true that consciousness exists; (iii) it is true that one understands that it is false that there is only one thing that is understood as true; (iv) it is true that one understands that an all pervasive illusion is incoherent; (v) it is true that one understands that one stands in truth, for unless one stands in truth and unless a stance is a true stance, there can be no sense in which an illusion can be perceived as an illusion; (vi) it is true that there exist five truths plus one additional truth (the truth that there exist five truths); (vii) there thus exist six truths plus one, *ad infinitum*.

The examination of the hypothesis of the omnipresent and omnipotent deceiver is not without value. The examination of the hypothesis of the omnipresent and omnipotent deceiver leads to a greater trust in the powers of the human mind and to the knowledge that an infinite number of certain truths can be generated. To face directly the hypothesis of the omnipresent and omnipotent deceiver brings great rewards. Such rewards do not accrue to the undue and cowardly rejection of, resistance to, and ignoring of the entire possibility of the omnipresent and omnipotent deceiver which is the unfortunate legacy of present day philosophy with which any philosopher now embarking upon her or his work must with a sense of sadness and repugnance realize is the pitiful starting point of the philosophy of the present era.

Notes

¹ For Peter Schouls, Descartes must begin with ‘... absolute trustworthiness of some things known immediately [*notitia*, ‘awareness of first principles’]...’ and it is clear from the context that he means that it is the *cogito* that is the first item of certain knowledge. Schouls refers to the *cogito* as the foundation for all further construction of scientia. (Thus, the term ‘first’ for all practical purposes in this context becomes equivalent to ‘only’). Cf., ‘Arnauld and the Modern Mind (the Fourth Objections as Indicative of Both Arnauld’s Openness to and His Distance from Descartes,’ in Elmar J. Kramer, *Interpreting Arnauld*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996, pp. 33-63. In a revealing passage quoted by William Reid in his doctoral dissertation, Descartes refers to his knowledge of his being a thinking being as a primitive act of knowledge (*primum quaedam notio*) derived from no syllogistic reasoning. Cf., William Lewis Reid, III, *An Examination of Descartes’ Evil Demon Argument*, University Microfilms, 1979, p. 313. Cf., Haldane and Ross, *The Complete Works of Descartes*, II, 38; AT VII, 140¹²⁻¹⁹ (Descartes’ italics). In the same work, Reid relates Popkin’s interesting historical account of the possible origin of Descartes’ argument in the trial of a parish priest, Grandier, in Loudun, who was accused of infesting the local convent with devils. If Grandier were deluded, then the detection of his delusion would have been impossible. Cf., *Op. cit.*, pp. 13-14 and Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*, New York: Harper and Row, 1964, pp. 182, 185.

² While Plato does not raise the argument of a malignant daemon, he does say in *Theaetetus* that there is no evidence to which one may point to prove whether we are awake or that all that passes through our minds is a dream. (158B, C)

³ In his book on Descartes, Bernard Williams points to the argument of Margaret MacDonald that one could always be dreaming that one were satisfied that one had found the criterion of distinction between waking and dreaming. In his own efforts at a solution (which Plato had argued to be impossible), Williams argues that from a waking state one can explain dreaming, and that this is an important asymmetry, but this surely begs the question. Williams’ argument seems to take the form that it is illegitimate to infer from the possibility that one may be mistaken about when one is awake that one is therefore always so mistaken. But the point of Plato and Descartes (prior to *Meditation VI*) is that since one may at any time be mistaken, it does not follow that one is always mistaken but what follows is that one may never be sure on which occasion one is mistaken and which not. This is the point that cannot be gainsaid. Cf., Bernard Williams, *DESCARTES, THE PROJECT OF PURE ENQUIRY*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986, pp. 309-313. Williams himself appears to supply an even more intriguing point when he argues that we cannot rely upon the veridicality of a past dreaming state since even the thought that we may have been dreaming is suspect. (*Ibid.*, pp. 57-8). Williams seems to be implying that the dream argument is in fact a provisional and less hyperbolic form of the malicious daemon argument. This is according to the present, respective author the point of Williams’ former point.

⁴ In a remarkable sentence, Schouls comments, "Counterbalancing a ‘supremely good’ G-d with a ‘malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning...’ has the effect of freeing the thinker from both." Cf., Elmar J. Kramer, *Interpreting Arnauld*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996, p. 44. Most thinkers, however, including those of Descartes’ time and those of the present time, do not wish to take Descartes’ radical step. For example, consider this statement of Dicker’s: ‘Most philosophers today, including the present writ-

er, would firmly reject Descartes' doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths. They would hold, as Leibniz held, that the truths of logic and pure mathematics are true in all the possible worlds that G-d could have created, so that not even an omnipotent G-d could dictate or alter them. They would also agree with the view, put forward by Aquinas, that omnipotence does not require the power to do logically impossible things, but only the power to do whatever is logically possible.' Cf., George Dicker, *Descartes, An Analytical and Historical Introduction*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996, p. 136. But as is argued above, one does not take Descartes' step at the peril of the weakening and the impoverishing of philosophy. There are other ways of solving such a problem of whether G-d can make a boulder so heavy that it is beyond the Divine power to lift it. One way is to argue that such a problem is a pseudo-problem since the impossibility of making a boulder beyond Divine power to lift is not a limitation of Divine power since the most current power would always define the Divine essence. Thus, the current power of lifting is the defining characteristic of G-d and not his previous power of making. In this way, the supposed impossibility of G-d's doing something is simply a limitation of logical description rather than a limitation of actual powers. An alternative form of such an argument is that the Divine always increases in power and that the problem arises from the limitation of the concept of omnipotence when it is circumscribed by the notion of the necessity of complete temporal actualization, and does not reflect at all on the limitation of G-d's omnipotence.