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FROM A NECESSARY BEING TO A PERFECT BEING: A REPLY TO BYERLY

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Abstract. Cosmological arguments for God typically have two stages. The first stage argues for a first cause or a necessary being, and the second stage argues from there to God. T. Ryan Byerly[1] offers a simple, abductive argument for the second stage where the best explanation for why the being is found to have necessary existence is that it is a perfect being. The reasoning behind this argument is that universal generalizations explain observations of their instances; for example, the universal generalization that all ravens are black explains why some particular raven is observed to be black. Similarly, the fact that a being has all perfections explains why we find the being to have necessary existence. I distinguish between two readings of Byerly's proposed theistic explanation, and conclude that his explanation does not offer an advantage to the theist in either case.

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I. INTRODUCTION

There are a variety of ways to reach the conclusion that a necessary being exists, e.g., a Leibnizian cosmological argument. Since a naturalist like Oppy[2] can accept that there is a necessary being, there needs to be further argumentation to complete the argument to God. To begin our thinking about the second stage of the argument, Byerly poses a question, "*why does this being exist necessarily*? Or, more perspicuously, *why do we find that this being has necessary existence*?"[3] Byerly's thought is that theism will have an advantage over non-theism in answering this question. Here it seems as if he is treating this as one question, but there are places in the paper where he seems to be looking for an answer to both questions. I suggest we separate both questions like so:

Q1: Why does this being *have* necessary existence?

Q2: Why do we *find* that this being has necessary existence?

and see whether his theistic explanation offers an advantage in either case.

Notice *Q1* asks for an explanation of the necessary existence of the being, while *Q2* asks for an explanation our *finding* that the being has necessary existence.[4] *Q1* is a question about the necessary being, while *Q2* is a question about us. To see that these two questions are distinct, consider a modification of an example from Eddington.[5] You use a net to catch fish from a lake and observe that all the fish are longer than 10 inches long. You then notice that there are holes in the net such that any fish smaller than 10 inches would escape. Suppose you are further informed that half the fish in the lake are smaller than 10 inches, while half are greater. We can ask questions analogous the two questions above: (1) Why are *these* fish longer than 10 inches? And (2) Why did I *observe* that the fish are longer than 10 inches? An answer

1 T. R. Byerly, "From a Necessary Being to a Perfect Being", *Analysis* 79, no. 1 (2019).
2 Graham Oppy, "Ultimate Naturalistic Casual Explanations", in *The Puzzle of Existence: Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?*, ed. Tyron Goldschmidt (Routledge, 2013), 46–7.
3 Byerly, "From a Necessary Being to a Perfect Being", 12.
4 I understand finding to be a process of discovery that's broader than observation which includes a priori discoveries.
5 Arthur S. Eddington, The Philosophy of Physical Science*: Tarner Lectures 1938* (CUP Archive, 1939).

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to the first question would appeal to internal features of the fish such as its genetics, age, and so on, while an answer to the second question would appeal to the holes in the net.

With this distinction between the two questions in mind, let's see Byerly's answer to the question(s) that started the stage two argument:

> So, why do we find that this being has necessary existence? Here's one answer: we find this because it is a perfect being — a being possessing all perfections — and necessary existence is a perfection. The idea behind this answer is that the fact that the being possesses all perfections would explain why it is that all of the perfections we've investigated have applied to it. All of the sample perfections we've investigated — namely, necessary existence — apply to this being because the being possesses all perfections. In supposing that in cases like this universal generalizations would explain observations of their instances, this proposal is endorsing an idea commonly affirmed by others (see, e.g. White 2005). Compare, for example, the felicitous explanation that some particular ra[6]ven is found to be black because all ravens are black.[7]

Byerly compares his theistic explanation to a universal generalization that explains observations of their instances. Comparing his theistic explanation to the "commonly affirmed" explanation by White[8] is the clearest support for the *Q2* reading.[9] In section 2, I will introduce the "commonly affirmed" explanation from White and consider how it can be applied towards answering *Q2*: Why do we *find* that this being has necessary existence? I raise some worries about his raven analogy and offer an analogy of my own. In section 3, I use Euthyphro-like concerns to argue that God's having all perfections is ill-suited towards answering *Q1*: Why does this being *have* necessary existence?

II. Q2: WHY DO WE FIND THAT THIS BEING HAS NECESSARY EXISTENCE?

Let's first consider *Q2*: Why do we *find* that this being has necessary existence? Recall that in answering why we observe that the fish are longer than 10 inches, we would appeal to facts about our observation, such as the holes in the net. So, in answering why we find that the being has necessary existence, we would appeal to the arguments like a contingency argument or a powers view of modality.[10] That is, we find that the being has necessary existence because of (say) the contingency argument. But Byerly says he has something more specific in mind. He clarifies, "We are wanting to know what there is about this being itself, if anything, that accounts for why we have found via this argument that it exists necessarily."[11]

Byerly compares his theistic explanation to the "commonly affirmed" explanation that some particular raven is observed to be black because all ravens are black. An initial question is: How does the universal generalization that all ravens are black explain why I *observe* that a particular raven is black? Byerly doesn't elaborate too much on this, so I will try to spell out the idea following White.[12] If all *F*s are *G*, then it's guaranteed that the *F*s I observe is *G*, for I can't observe non-*G F*s. So, for example, if all ravens are black, then it's guaranteed that the ravens I observe are black, for I can't observe non-black ravens. On the other hand, if half of the ravens are black and half are white, then it would be surprising that I've only observed black ravens. So the hypothesis that all ravens are black better explains why I observe a particular raven to be black over the hypothesis that some but not all ravens are black. Applying this line of reasoning to perfections, the thought seems to be that if the being has all perfections, then it's guaranteed that the perfections I find—namely, necessary existence—is had by the being, for I can't find a perfection that the being doesn't have. On the other hand, if the being only had half the perfections, then it would be to some degree surprising to find that necessary existence is one of them. So the hypothesis that the

6 Byerly, "From a Necessary Being to a Perfect Being" .
7 Ibid., 12.
8 Roger White, "Explanation as a Guide to Induction", *Philosophers' Imprint* 5 (2005).
9 Byerly has personally communicated to me that the *finding* interpretation (*Q2*) is the intended one.
10 See Tien-Chun Lo, "The Gap Problem Made Easy?", *Analysis* 80, no. 3 (2020) to see how a powers view of modality can explain necessary existence. In his response to Byerly, "From a Necessary Being to a Perfect Being", he seems to have the *Q1* interpretation: Why does this being *have* necessary existence?
11 Byerly, "From a Necessary Being to a Perfect Being", 14.
12 White, "Explanation as a Guide to Induction", 7–9.

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being has all perfections better explains why I find necessary existence over the hypothesis that the being has some but not all perfections. Typically, the fact that all *F*s are *G* better explains why I find a particular *F* to be *G*, over the hypothesis that some but not all *F*s are *G*.[13]

The task for the naturalist is to offer an equal or better explanation for our finding that the being has necessary existence. Byerly is skeptical that the naturalist can do this, and he anticipates a naturalistic explanation:

> Moreover, it remains unclear what else can be said about the being that would explain why we find that it has the perfection we've investigated that would explain this just as well as the proposal that it has all perfections. For example, the proposal that [we find][14] it has necessary existence because it has many but not all perfections is no more attractive than the proposal that [we observe that] all of a sample of ravens are black because many but not all ravens are black.[15]

My proposed non-theistic explanation for why we find the being to be necessary is that it is necessary. This explanation is silent on whether the being has other perfections. Since the explanation doesn't mention God, it is non-theistic. This explanation is more parsimonious because we don't have to posit anything more than what both sides have already accepted at the start of stage 2. Compare this with explaining the observation of *this* raven being black with it being black. What best explains why I observe that this raven is black? Because it is black.

There is some reason to doubt that the raven example is analogous to the case with perfections. Recall that Byerly asks us for the *internal* feature of the being in question that explains what we observe or find. Note that while genes *causally* explain why we observe a raven to be black, there can't be a causal explanation to the necessary existence of the being, since there can't be a cause prior to the first cause.[16] Instead, the kind of explanation that Byerly uses in his theistic explanation is one where the thing found (necessary existence) is a *unique constituent* of the internal feature doing the explaining (the having of all perfections). I'm skeptical about this kind of explanation, and I offer the following color analogy to illustrate.

Suppose we find that a particular object, *O*, is partly blue, but we don't know if it's fully blue or if it has other colors, as we can't see the entire object.[17] What best explains why we observe that *O* has a blue part? To make the analogy like the necessary existence case, I must exclude causal explanations. One hypothesis is that *O* has all the colors (analogous to having all perfections).[18] Just as necessary existence is a unique constituent of all the perfections, so is a blue part a unique constituent to all the colors. What explains why we observe that the *O* has a blue part? One hypothesis is that *O* has all the colors, and that explains why we observe the blue part. If it has all the colors then it's guaranteed that blue is among the colors to be found. A second hypothesis is that *O* has some but not all colors (analogous to Byerly's proposed naturalistic explanation that is has some but not all perfections). Here it could be that blue is not among the colors to be found. A final hypothesis is that *O* has a blue part (analogous to my proposed non-theistic explanation). Why do we observe that *O* has a blue part? Because it has a blue part. I suggest that this final hypothesis is the best explanation because it is the most parsimonious, while also guaranteeing that blue is among the properties to be found. I propose that Byerly's explanation resembles this color example more closely than his raven example. But *even if* the raven example is a good analogy, inductive inferences are often weak when the sample size is one, and it is seemingly weak in this case. Byerly makes an inductive inference that the being has all perfections (however many there are) from

13 White, "Explanation as a Guide to Induction", 13 gives some examples of "deviant inferences" where not all inductive inferences fit this pattern.

14 I add 'we find' to make it clear we are considering *Q2*, otherwise it might seem we are considering *Q1*.

15 Byerly, "From a Necessary Being to a Perfect Being", 15.

16 For the purposes of this paper, I take for granted that there is a first cause.

17 This is analogous to finding out that a being is necessary before determining if it has other perfections. This is where the stage 2 argument starts.

18 One might think that moral good-making properties would be a better analogy than colors. I'm skeptical this is so. I think it is more plausible that good-making properties are found together because persons can freely choose to be good and hence have those properties. Necessary existence, by contrast, is not something that a being can freely choose to have.

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finding the single perfection of necessary existence. This would be somewhat analogous to inferring that all ravens are black from the observation of a single black raven.

Another consideration from White that may count against Byerly's inference to all perfections is that:

> [E]xplanatory appeal to a generalization can often be more satisfying if we have some idea of how the generalization itself might be explained. And consequently the strength of an inductive inference depends on our prospects for explaining the explanatory generalization. Indeed, in many cases where we are sure that there can be no explanation of the generalization, our observations give us little or no evidence for the generalization. If I toss a coin many times and observe nothing but heads, I have some reason to think that it has always landed heads and always will. But the strength of this evidence depends on our answer to the question 'Why does it keep on landing heads? ' Suppose we are quite certain that the coin is evenly weighted and tossed in the ordinary way, and so if it does land heads every time this is just a fluke. In this case we have no reason to expect any other tosses to land heads. We have reason to think that all tosses of the coin have landed heads only to the extent that we can suppose that, say, the coin is double-headed, or something of this sort that could explain the generalization.[19]

In the case of ravens, we have reason to think they evolved through a common ancestor so they share common genetics that could explain the generalization that all ravens are black. In the case of many coin flips landing heads, even if we don't know the actual explanation, we would think that there is some causal explanation out there to support the inductive inference to the generalization. But in the case with necessary existence, it's not clear how the being's having all perfections could be explained. Surely not by definition, and surely not causally, since we are assuming that it is the first cause. The lack of a potential explanation for the being's having of all perfections raises a worry for Byerly's inference.

One worry for my proposed non-theistic explanation—that we find the being to be necessary because it is necessary—is that it is not an alternative to Byerly's theistic explanation, for maybe the question I'm answering is different than the one Byerly is asking.[20] To use the raven analogy again, Byerly could agree that we observe that this raven is black because it is black, but his question could be about the *total* population of ravens. His question could be analogous to: What explanation about the total population of ravens best explains why I observe this raven to be black? On this framing of the question, it seems that all ravens being black is a better explanation than *only* this raven being black. If only this raven was black, it would be very surprising that I happened to observe a black raven. Applying this to the case of perfections, his question becomes: What explanation about the total population of perfections best explains why I find necessary existence? The thought would then be that the being's having all perfections would be a better explanation than the being's having *only* this perfection. Let us now suppose that the question is about the total population of perfections. First, if my color example is a good analogy, we could set up an analogous question: What explanation about the total population of colors best explains why I observe that *O* has a blue part? It does not seem to me that *O*'s having all the colors is a better explanation than *O*'s being *only* blue.[21] Perhaps we should remain agnostic about the total population of colors. Secondly, what we have been assuming so far is that an explanation that makes an observation (or finding) unsurprising is an explanatory virtue. For example, observing that some particular raven is black is not surprising if all ravens are black, and hence a good explanation. Yet this explanatory virtue does not seem to favor Byerly's explanation. Compare the hypothesis that being has all perfections with the hypothesis that the being only has necessary existence as a perfection. On either hypothesis, if you find the perfection in question—necessary existence—it is guaranteed to be had by the being. I conclude that Byerly's hypothesis does not make it less surprising to find necessary existence, hence it is not a better explanation.

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19 White, "Explanation as a Guide to Induction", 10.

20 I thank a referee at EJPR for raising this point.

21 Note that even though I believe that necessary existence is the *only* perfection had by the being, my proposed non-theistic explanation—that we find the being to be necessary because it is necessary—was silent on whether there are other perfections had by the being.

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The triviality of my proposed non-theistic explanation—that we find the being to be necessary because it is necessary—suggests that the more interesting question is *Q1*: Why does this being *have* necessary existence?[22] Indeed, in places he seems like he's looking for an answer to *Q1*.

III. Q1: WHY DOES THIS BEING HAVE NECESSARY EXISTENCE?

Next let's consider what I think is the more interesting question: *Q1*. Why does this being *have* necessary existence? This is a question about the necessary being itself rather than a question about us. Recall that Byerly compares his theistic explanation to a universal generalization that explains observations of their instances. There's reason to think that universal generalizations won't work for *Q1*-type questions, where we drop the idea that we're explaining our observations or findings. Following White,[23] suppose we've collected a raven in a cage. Here we're asking why *this* raven is black, and not why we observe this raven to be black. It's irrelevant to say that this raven is black because all the ravens are black, since this raven is black regardless of the color of the other ravens.[24] Someone could have painted all the other ravens white, but this raven would still be black. To explain why this raven is black we would (at least) appeal to its internal features, such as its genetics, and these internal features would in turn explain the universal generalization that all ravens are black. So it seems that the use of universal generalizations will not help with answering *Q1*.

Byerly explains what a competing non-theistic explanation to necessary existence should look like:

> What we should expect from such an explanation is that it would highlight some internal features of the being in question that would explain why we find that it has necessary existence. It would not do, for instance, to be told that the being has the perfection we've investigated — necessary existence — because it was identified as the being playing the appropriate role specified by the conclusion of a cosmological argument. What we are wanting to know is precisely why this being plays this role, and in particular why it is a necessary being. We are wanting to know what there is about this being itself, if anything, that accounts for why we have found via this argument that it exists necessarily.[25]

In this passage, it seems that he's asking the naturalist both *Q1* and *Q2*. If Byerly expects the naturalist to answer *Q1*, it's only fair that his own explanation can answer *Q1*. I'll argue that it does not.

I've already questioned how the use of universal generalizations can help us in answering *Q1*, so I think a different kind of explanation is needed. Causal explanations won't work, since we are presuming the being in question is the first cause. So the kind of explanation I want to turn to is a non-causal, metaphysical grounding explanation to see if God's perfection can be the internal feature that serves as an explanation for necessary existence. To get a better idea on grounding, consider some examples from Schaffer:

> For some clear examples of grounding, consider the relations between: (i) the entity and its singleton[26], (ii) the Swiss cheese and its holes, (iii) natural features and moral features, (iv) sparse properties and abundant properties, and (v) truthmakers and truths.[27]

In Schaffer's (iii), the moral features are explained by natural features (or non-moral features); e.g., the fact that I ought to save the drowning person is explained (at least partially) by the fact that it would alleviate suffering. This is the kind of explanation I have in mind. The problem is that perfection does not

22 I think there are good reasons to think that the initial segment of the natural universe is necessary (cf. Oppy, "Ultimate Naturalistic Casual Explanations"). I'm sympathetic to an Aristotelian or powers view on modality (cf. Lo, "The Gap Problem Made Easy?").

23 White, "Explanation as a Guide to Induction", 8–9.

24 The color of the other raven would be explanatorily relevant if the other raven passed its genes onto our raven. Still, the proximate explanation would be the internal features of this raven. In any case, I do not see how God's other perfections would explain his necessary existence, so the point that other ravens being explanatorily irrelevant still holds.

25 Byerly, "From a Necessary Being to a Perfect Being", 14.

26 For example, Socrates's existence explains the existence of the set {Socrates}.

27 Jonathan Schaffer, "On What Grounds What", in *Metametaphysics*: *New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David Manley, David J. Chalmers and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 375.

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seem to offer this kind of grounding explanation for necessary existence. To see why, let's take a quick detour into a recent Euthyphro dialectic. Wes Morriston asks, "Is God good because He has these good-making properties? Or are they good-making because God has them?"[28] Consider the good-making properties like being loving, generous etc. Intuitively, God would be good because he has these properties, for it seems odd to say that these properties are good-making just because God has them. That is, the goodness of God, or any person for that matter, is explained by having good-making properties. With this in mind, we can apply an analogous line of reasoning to another *evaluative* property: perfection.[29] Is God perfect because he has the great-making (or perfect-making) properties of necessary existence, omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection etc.? Or are these properties great-making (or perfections) because God has them? Intuitively, God is perfect because he has these great-making properties. That is, God's perfection is explained (partially) by his necessary existence; these great-making properties *make* God great.[30] Notice this intuitive direction of explanation is the reverse of the *Q1* reading of Byerly, as he wants to say God's necessary existence is explained by God's perfection. I take it that grounding explanations are asymmetric: if *A* explains *B*, then *B* doesn't explain *A*. Since this direction of explanation goes in the reverse direction, God's perfection is not a successful grounding explanation for necessary existence, and hence Byerly's theistic explanation does not successfully answer *Q1*.

Suppose one does accept this reversed direction of explanation. This is just what Craig does with respect to the good, as he says:

> [A]re these properties like loving-kindness, impartiality, generosity good because God possesses them or does God possess them because they are good? [Koons] imagines this as a dilemma. It seems to me there is no dilemma there at all…. These properties are good because God possesses them.[31]

Two points. First, this reversed direction of explanation will probably be unpersuasive to the naturalist, so this stage two argument for God will be dialectically ineffective. Second, this direction of explanation makes God's goodness (and, analogously, perfection) empty, as Koons argues.[32]

To briefly explain, consider the question: What is God's goodness? If God's goodness explains why properties like being loving, generous etc. are good, then these properties can't be appealed to in considering what God's goodness consists in, since we want to know about the goodness that explains why those properties are good. *That* goodness is logically or explanatorily prior to the virtues. What is *that* goodness like? Once these more descriptive properties are removed when considering what God's goodness consists in, what we are left with is a goodness that is empty of content. By contrast, if we think that God is good *because* he has these more descriptive properties, then we can think of a God's goodness as loving, generous etc. such that it is not empty of content. By an analogous line of reasoning, if God's perfection explains why necessary existence is a perfection, then God's perfection becomes empty of content. Consider an analogy to elucidate the emptiness objection. Suppose a cube is colored, but the cube isn't colored *because* it is red, green, or one of the more descriptive colors. In this analogy, the cube's being colored is logically or explanatorily prior to any more descriptive color. It seems, then, that the cube's color is "empty" of content. There's nothing to imagine when we imagine the cube's color. On the other hand, if the cube is colored because it is red, then there is something to imagine.

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28 Wes Morriston, "What if God Commanded Something Terrible? A Worry for Divine-Command Meta-Ethics", *Religious Studies* 45, no. 3 (2009): 253.

29 Following what Simon Kirchin, Thick Evaluation (Oxford Univ. Press, 2017) calls the "conservative" view, I count a property as evaluative "if in every instance of its use there is a clear and obvious positive or negative stance or view being expressed."

30 'Make' should be understood in the metaphysical grounding sense and not the causal sense.

31 "The Euthyphro Dilemma Once Again | Reasonable Faith", last modified July 27, 2021:10:47, https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/reasonable-faith-podcast/the-euthyphro-dilemma-once-again. Koons says that the virtues cannot be used as an explanation-what for God's goodness because God's goodness is logically prior to the virtues. Craig misses this point.

32 Jeremy Koons, "Can God's Goodness Save the Divine Command Theory from Euthyphro?", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4, no. 1 (2012).

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I take these two points—a reversed direction explanation, and consequent emptiness of perfection—as strong reasons that the perfection do not answer *Q1*; that is, God's being perfect does not explain (i.e. metaphysically ground) his necessary existence.

IV. CONCLUSION

In explaining why we find necessary existence—that is, answering Q2—the best explanation seems to be to simply appeal to the being's necessary existence to explain why we find it. I questioned the raven analogy and raised a color analogy of my own. The prospects for explaining why the being has necessary existence—that is, answering *Q1*—via universal generalizations seem bleak to me, whether it's naturalistic or theistic. I consider metaphysical grounding explanations as a possible theistic explanation, but Euthyphro-related concerns provide strong reasons to think that perfection does not explain necessary existence. Whether Byerly is answering *Q1* or *Q2*, his proposed explanation of a perfect being offers no advantage to the theist.

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