BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

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Alexander R. Pruss and Joshua L. Rasmussen, *Necessary Existence*, **Oxford Univ. Press, 2018, 223 pp.**

In *Necessary Existence*, Pruss and Rasmussen defend the idea that there is a necessary concrete being—where what it is to be concrete just is to be capable of causation. A step on the road to natural theology, the far-reaching conclusion argued for in this volume ought to be of interest to anyone with a philosophical temperament (and a spot of formal training).

The novel contributions of this volume are many. The book opens with an interesting elaboration of the results of an online survey conducted by the authors. It turns out that more of us believe what are premises in an argument to the existence of a necessary being than one might expect. Indeed, we may even be disposed to be rationally persuaded that such a being exists. Chapter 2 sets out formal machinery. In chapter 3, the more substantial work of the book begins with a return to a classical cosmological argument from contingency. Operating against a background logic of S5, in chapters 4 through 8, the authors offer novel possibility-based arguments in defence of necessary concreta.

In chapter 4, the authors develop what they call the 'Modal Argument from Beginnings': an argument that moves us from an assumption about its being possible that there is a beginning of the state of affairs of there existing contingent concrete things to the conclusion that there is a necessary concrete being. In chapter 5, we are given the 'Weak Argument from Beginnings': an argument weak in the sense that the causal principle it invokes is substantially weaker than standard versions of the principle. In chapter 6, the authors develop a rather intriguing 'Argument from Modal Uniformity'. Crudely, if p and q differ by a mere quantity, then p is possibly true iff q is possibly true. This principle is then employed as support for the premises of previous arguments. In chapter 7, the authors deliver the 'Argument from Abstracta': as necessarily there is an abstract object there is a necessary concrete object.

And in chapter 8, the 'Argument from Perfections': both existing necessarily and possibly causing something are positives, if existing necessarily and possibly causing something are positive, then their conjunction is possible. By S5, we move from there possibly being a necessary concretum to there actually being one. In chapter 9, the authors offer an extended discussion of reasons to deny the existence of a necessary being.

To be sure, a decent share of the heavy lifting in many of the arguments is done by principles of modal reasoning. One benefit of such an approach is its potential to speak to an audience of otherwise secularized contemporary analytic metaphysicians. The association between a causally efficacious necessary being and the God of the Christian tradition is so powerful that the death, as it were, of the latter has led to a complete abandonment of any serious consideration of the former. *Necessary Existence* deserves much praise for presenting a slew of arguments that require no theological commitments, nor entail any, but compel us to, once again, take seriously the thought that a necessary concrete being might be required to do justice to many of our explanatory projects.

And it is with the notion of explanation that the volume finds itself in old and substantial waters. In addition to the principles of modal logic, the authors make heavy use of certain explanatory principles; principles that take on a life of their own in the context of projects that aim at ultimate explanations. And that this is what the authors are in the business of is indicated not only by their commitment to a necessary *concretum*, but also by their use of principles according to which, for example, 'no facts about the existence or activities of contingent instances of *F* can, by themselves, explain why *there exist* those things that are *F*…. an external explanation is required' (pg.45). Were the authors simply invested in establishing the existence of any old necessary being, certain kinds of arguments against nominalism, for example, could achieve that. And it is obvious that relative to more mundane explanatory projects, *internal explanations* are perfectly acceptable. One would expect an explanation for how any particular human exists to make appeal to that human's parents, for example.

But it is also with the notion of explanation that, I confess, to have found aspects of what the authors have to say a little bit puzzling. Consider the following explanatory principle: for any particular contingent concrete things, there is an explanation of the fact that those things exist (p.34). Elsewhere

the authors go on to say '… we take explanation claims to be expressed by 'because'-sentences…' (p.36).

Although the authors often switch between 'causing' and 'explaining', there is good reason to think that something like a notion of *grounding* is also, or perhaps *ought to be*, in operation. After all, much of the recent work done on 'because'-statements has been carried out in the context of discussions of grounding. And what we can think of as *grounds*, in addition to causes, seem to naturally enter into explanations of facts about existence. Indeed, the history of cosmological arguments attests to the role for a notion of something like grounding. Realising that there need not be a *first cause* — the world may extend backwards infinitely in time — Leibniz argued that God's existence is required nonetheless: there must be an ultimate ontological ground that serves as the sufficient reason for everything else. A notion of ground, and its corresponding sense of *metaphysical explanation*, has long had a place in our cosmological reasoning.

But what happens to Pruss and Rasmussen's arguments when a notion of ground is employed? In chapter 3 (p.34), the authors run the following argument:

(1) For any particular contingent concrete things that exist, there is an explanation of the fact that those things exist.

(2) Considering all the contingent concrete things that exist, if there is an explanation of the fact that *those things exist*, then there is a necessary concrete thing.

(3) Therefore, there is a necessary concrete thing.

Let us begin by focusing on premise 2. Packed into this premise is (i) an implicit understanding of what it is that needs to be explained, and (ii) the application of an explanatory principle that moves us beyond a collection to a necessary concrete being. On pg.45, the authors go on to clarify what is at stake, 'we will refer to the state of affairs of the *actual contingent things existing* as "the Big Contingent State". Premise (2) records the thought that the Big Contingent State can't be adequately explained apart from the causal activity of one or more non-contingent things'. And why is this? Because 'no facts about the existence or activities of contingent instances of *being contingent and concrete* can, by themselves, explain why there exist those very contingent concrete things' (pp.45-46). In broad strokes, the big contingent state cannot be explained by the very contingent concrete things that constitute the state.

How does this argument fare if we switch to a formulation in terms of grounding? Suppose there is a big contingent state. Let us also suppose that what it is to be grounded is to have a metaphysical explanation, and that what it is to be ungrounded is to be lacking a metaphysical explanation. If the BCS is to have a grounding explanation it must itself be grounded. So what grounds the BCS?

How we are to answer this question is by no means straightforward. If the BCS is some sort of super conjunction — the conjunction of all contingent facts — by the logic of ground, there is an easy answer to our question: what grounds the BCS are the contingent facts that are its conjuncts. Taking the BCS as something like a whole with parts yields a similar result.[1] When recast in the language of grounding, what grounds the BCS are the contingent entities that constitute it.

The demand for an external explanation that is built into the second assumption would seem to help us solve this problem, however; regardless of whether or not the constituents of the BCS can afford us *some kind* of explanation, they cannot afford us the kind of explanation that we are after, namely, one that makes appeal to none of them.

But having switched to the language of grounding, we can wonder, though, why we ought to be concerned with explaining only the BCS. Let us suppose, then, that we need an explanation for the Big Grounded State (BGS). As already indicated, there is an easy answer to this question. But to answer as such is to fail to respect the kind of explanatory principle that our authors include amongst their assumptions. Let us also suppose, then, that *no facts about the existence or activities of grounded instances of being grounded can, by themselves, explain why there exist those very grounded things.*

Where does our argument lead us? Straight to the existence of something ungrounded, it would seem. Note, however, that having switched to the language of grounding, we have established *nothing* about the modal status of our ultimate explainer(s): it (they) could be contingent, necessary or some combination of the two.

The grounding version of the argument has several advantages. First, it allows us to respect the quest for an ultimate explanation without ruling out the possibility of such an explanation being naturalistic. Second, although there

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1   Suggesting that grounding runs from part to whole does not help us here. If parts depend on wholes, then wholes are independent, in which case they are ungrounded.

are complicated questions surrounding the relationship between grounding and the Principle of Sufficient Reason, the revised argument only forces us to commit to the trivial claim that everything that has a metaphysical explanation has a metaphysical explanation. This is in opposition to the *much* weightier assumption proposed by the authors that *every contingent fact has an explanation*. Third, reformulating the argument in terms of grounding looks to respect the thought that whilst infinite causal regresses are acceptable, infinite grounding regresses are not. There are compelling reasons to believe there needs *not* be a *first cause*, but compelling reasons to believe there must be an ultimate ground.

So much for grounding. Let us return to the explanatory principle that the authors are wielding; the principle packed into the second premise. In a further elaboration of the principle offered above, the authors state, 'no facts about the existence or activities of contingent instances of *F* can, by themselves, explain why *there exist* those things that are *F*. To be clear, the *F*s may also be *G*s, and perhaps their being *G* explains their being *F*; even still, their being *G* doesn't explain their very existence; an external explanation is required' (p.45). This principle as stated, however, looks too under-defined to avoid giving rise to spurious explanations. Consider the collection of contingent things that are blue. Suppose we want to know why those blue things exist. Our explanatory principle tells us that no blue thing amongst our collection of blue things can explain why they exist, and that we need something external. But what is external to the collection of blue things? The red things, the yellow things, and so on. Yet we would hardly want to say that simply by dint of being *external* to the collection of blue things, the red things are apt to explain why they exist.

One way of understanding what might be motivating the demand for an external explanation is what Maitzen refers to as the *kind-instantiation principle*: 'Where K is any substantial kind… you can't explain why there are any Ks at all by invoking only Ks, even if your explanation goes on forever'[2]. In other words, no member of a kind can explain why that kind comes to be instantiated in the first place. By the lights of this principle, blue things don't need external explanations — because they do not form a substantial kind — and so red things are not required to explain them.

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2   Maitzen S., 'Questioning the Question', in *The Puzzle of Existence: why is there something rather than nothing?* (ed) Tyron Goldschmidt, Routledge (2013), p.260.

But this refinement of the explanatory principle compels us to reformulate our explanatory target.; amongst other possible problems. Substituting 'contingent thing' in we get: you can't explain why there are any contingent things at all by invoking only contingent things. And the authors are, in fact, explicit that they are not interested in asking this question (See footnote 12 pg.46). As it certainly seems reasonable to seek an explanation for the BCS, and I wish not to challenge the authors' stated explanatory project, let us proceed with the original target.

Where does this leave us, then? Recall that what the authors are seeking an explanation for is the existence of the collection of contingent, *concrete* things. What is external to this collection? It seems we have three options: the necessary concrete things, the necessary abstract things and the contingent abstract things. Let us grant that what cries out for explanation are the things that could have failed to exist, namely, the contingent things. We are left with are necessary abstracta and necessary concreta. The authors stipulate that the necessary being is concrete in the sense that it is capable of causation. It is worth noting, however, that necessary *abstracta* are perfectly capable of entering into explanatory relations. On explanatory grounds alone, then, we appear to have no real means of adjudicating between necessary concreta and necessary abstracta as the ultimate explanatory ground for the Big State of Contingent Concreta.

With a notion of ground in operation, these problems also appear to compound. Suppose that what we are after is an ultimate ground for the Big State of Grounded Contingent Concreta.[3] What is external to this state? Ungrounded contingent concreta, ungrounded contingent abstracta, ungrounded necessary concreta, ungrounded necessary abstracta, grounded necessary concreta, grounded necessary abstracta and grounded contingent abstracta. Possibilities abound. A more refined explanatory principle would seem to be in order.

Nothing I have said here should detract from the achievements of this volume. *Necessary Existence* is a dense, rich and bold read. The authors are to be commended for their rigorous reinvigoration of an old, important and sadly unfashionable set of philosophical issues.

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3   Indeed, exactly what the contemporary metaphysical foundationalist seems to be committed to is a picture of reality according to which the fundamenta ultimately explain the grounded contingent concreta.