**Materially Necessary Being**

In an earlier paper in this series, I defined a materially possible being as one capable of existing at some time or other relative to some set of conditions obtaining in a possible world W. Such a being will also be formally, logically, really, and existentially possible in that world. In a subsequent paper, I explored the notion of a materially contingent being, one capable of existing or of failing to do so in a world relative to the conditions obtaining in that world at some particular time T and which thus is capable of failing to exist in that world at any time that it in fact exists there. However, whereas a being that exists in any world is possibly existent in every world, it does not follow that such a being will be materially possible in every world. Such beings will exist in some worlds and not in others, for example in those worlds in which its existence is altogether excluded by the laws of nature existing there and thus is physically impossible in that world. Material possibility is thus always defined within a world and is not, therefore, a modal status that attaches to entities across possible worlds as do the logical modalities as understood in accordance with the axioms of the S5 modal system.

In the same way, all actual beings existing in the actual world are also materially possible in that world, since actuality proves possibility. However, not every thing that is materially possible, even in the actual world, actually exists there and the status of being real, actual, existent, and so on is limited solely to that world. However, I argued in the same paper that the existence of at least one materially contingent being, myself, is extrinsically certain for me and this entails that there is an actual world. The notion of material possibility, then, serves as a convenient and useful intermediary between *de re* logical possibility on the one hand and full-blown actuality on the other, one that escapes the limitations of reliance upon what I elsewhere (following Kant’s *Beweisgrund*) called mere formal possibility and which is usually taken to be our sole, intuitive entrée into modal notions generally.

Having considered material possibility and material contingency, respectively, I wish to continue this line of analysis with a consideration of the notion of material necessity, or the notion of materially necessary being. This would constitute a second species of materially possible being in accordance with the material modalities distinguished in the first paper in this series. One may well wonder whether anything can or does correspond to this architectonic notion or category, and I will address these issues in due course. For the nonce, let me simply note that the notion of materially necessary being as I defined it earlier simply refers to a being that is capable of existing at every particular time in a world W is not stillborn. It is evidently formally possible, since it is apparently coherently conceivable – it does not unite incompatible predicates in a single subject and so is imaginable so far forth – and thus is intrinsically epistemically possible. Nor is the existence of such a being excluded by anything else that we know, so that it is extrinsically epistemically possible as well. Being formally possible, it is thus presumptively logically possible and thus innocent until proven guilty. Proof of guilt, of course, can only be garnered from further analysis, which is what I shall now proceed to pursue.

**The Concept of Material Necessary Being** The concept of materially necessary being can be discussed in the abstract, but since so conceived it is the notion of a *de re* modal status that conceivably attaches to some being or beings, we can most effectively investigate and analyze this concept by reference to that of *a* materially necessary being, just as we did for the concepts of material possibility and material contingency. In accordance with my earlier definitions of these terms, I defined a materially possible being as one that is capable of existence at some time or other in some possible world and a materially contingent being as one both capable of existence at some time in some world and of non-existence at some other time in that world. The contrasting notion of a materially necessary being, then, will be that of a being capable of existence at every moment of time in some possible world.

To say that a metaphysically necessary being is capable of existing at all times in any world in which it exists is, at a bare minimum, to deny that the proposition “The (aforementioned) metaphysically necessary being is non-existent” is true at any time in that world. This does not commit us to the claim that such a being is present in each moment of time as a being subject to temporal passage. Even a sempiternal Aristotelian god wholly unrelated to time or to temporal passage would be a metaphysically necessary being in this sense, one for which it would be true at every time T in that world that this God exists. In the same way, the God of traditional theism, who as Creator is present in power and knowledge to each moment of time and to every being subject to temporal passage while remaining timelessly eternal in Himself, would also meet the same condition and will be a metaphysically necessary being.

Since a materially contingent being is so due to the fact that it is dependent on conditions outside itself in order to exist, its existence in a world will depend on the conditions prevailing there, such that it will exist when the necessary and sufficient conditions for its existence obtain and not otherwise. However, just for this reason, it will not be sufficient for something to be a materially necessary being merely that it *actually* exist at every moment in some world, like the star I referred to in a previous paper. Such a star is only (if I may be allowed) accidentally necessary in that world, given that the externally necessary and sufficient conditions for its actual existence obtain within that world for its entire duration. Even so, those conditions can obtain in such a way that they do not entirely exclude the material possibility that conditions within that world might have been different than they were in fact, as when, for example, it is consistent with the laws of physics obtaining in that world that physically possible conditions consistent with those laws might have obtained that would have brought it about that the star in question either never exist in the first place or that it cease to exist at some point, even if it always is and never does cease to exist in that world. In that case, the star in question is still a materially contingent being despite its being actual at every moment in that particular world. This suggests, then, that to have a distinct notion of a materially necessary being requires not only that such a being be capable of existing at every moment of time in some world, but that the material possibility of its non-existence in that world be wholly excluded at every moment in that world. This means that no conditions that might obtain or have obtained in that world, even in principle, could either prevent its existence in that world or cause it to cease to exist in that world.

To conceive of such a being, then, is to conceive of a being that does not depend on any conditions external to itself either for the fact of its existence or the integrity of its existence in relation to time. Such a being will be such that the necessary and sufficient conditions for its existence obtain at every moment of time. The concept of such a being, then, also excludes the material possibility of any set of conditions obtaining capable of preventing or hindering the existence of such a being. It thus excludes both the notion of external background conditions for its existence and of the need for a proximate cause for its existence, since the existence of either of these would make the non-existence of that being at some time or other conceivable as a material possibility. As such, the concept of such a being excludes dependency on anything external to itself, since otherwise its non-existence at some point in time would be conceivable either as a result of the failure of those conditions to obtain at all or their failing to obtain at some point in time in that world. A materially necessary being, then, will be (in one traditional sense of that term) an *infinite*, as opposed to finite, being. Materially contingent beings are finite beings in this sense; they are limited with regard to their existence due to the fact that they are dependent on conditions external to themselves for that existence, conditions that they are unable to secure either by nature or retain simply by the exercise of their inherent powers. By contrast, a materially necessary being will have to be one that is not limited or dependent on any conditions existing external to itself. An actually existent being of this kind will be one that exists at every moment of time in such a manner that nothing that happens external to itself can alter or affect that fact. Such a being will thus be both immutable and impassible with regard to anything existing outside of itself.

Since such a being does not depend on anything outside of itself either for its coming into existence or remaining in existence, it must contain the necessary and sufficient conditions for its existence within itself, as something inseparable from its nature. In contrast to a materially contingent being, then, a materially necessary being can only be conceived as a being whose essence is *not* indifferent to existence but which contains within itself the reason, ground, and explanation for its own existence. It is only due to this fact that both conceivable as actual and capable of existing in those worlds in which it exists in such a way as to be immune from any dependence for its existence on anything outside itself at every moment in that world. Such a being, therefore, will exist *a se* (“out of itself”) and also be *causa sui* (“cause of itself”).[[1]](#footnote-1) Since nothing can literally be the cause of its own coming into existence, we have to conceive of it eternally existent in a way that wholly excludes the question of its origin in or even with the advent of time.

One way of conceiving of such a being, which I have explored and presented elsewhere is to conceive of it as a being whose essence is to exist, and in which therefore there is no real distinction between essence and existence of the sort we find in materially contingent beings.[[2]](#footnote-2) Although metaphysicians have disputed concerning whether essence or existence takes precedence in the proper analysis of this peculiar form of being, and my preference lies with the “existentialist” position in this dispute, I nevertheless believe that these accounts are convergent rather than opposed to one another. However, I will here follow the “existentialist” approach, according to which what it means to say in the case of metaphysically necessary being that its essence is to exist is to say that such a being possesses the essence characteristic of an act of existence that simply expresses the fullness of being in an untrammeled, unlimited way. Thus, instead of being constrained or circumscribed by a limiting essence that (from the point of view of activity-as-such) limits the act of existence to some potentialities and not others by endowing it with some discrete, fixed selection of inherent properties, as we find in the case of metaphysically contingent beings, a metaphysically necessary being will simply realize the potency of that act considered as such. We will further consider this idea below.

**The Existence of a Metaphysically Necessary Being** We possess an apparently coherent account notion of a metaphysically necessary being, as presented in the last section. Given the preceding analysis, the next question that suggests itself is whether such any such being, or beings, exist. I believe that an examination of two definitional consequences of the foregoing analysis can help us answer this question affirmatively.

In the first place, we may note that a metaphysically necessary being can be conceived of only as actually existent, never as what Kant calls a “merely possible” being. Because materially contingent beings are such that their natures are indifferent to existence, their natures can be conceived abstractly and the material possibility of their non-existence entertained – as in his example of the imaginary hundred thalers discussed earlier. Indeed, in the case of materially contingent being, it can be an open question whether that nature is exemplified or instantiated in the actual world, and hence whether any such being exists there. However, since a metaphysically necessary being possesses a nature that is not indifferent to existence, it cannot be conceived of as possibly non-existent. The non-existence of any such being, then, is not conceivable as a material possibility. As such, the very nature of the thing conceived of excludes the material possibility of its non-existence. Nor can it be an open question whether such a being exists once the matter arises, since nothing can actually be the case unless it is first materially possible. In that case, the material impossibility of that being’s non-existence excludes the actual non-existence of that being as well. Once we clearly and distinctly conceive of such a being, and recognize that its actual non-existence is materially impossible, the question concerning its actual existence is moot. The very nature of the thing conceived of excludes the material possibility of its non-existence.

The same considerations will exclude the logical possibility of the non-existence of that being. For the purposes of material logic, we have defined a logically possible being as one that is materially possible in at least one possible world. In accordance with the standard semantics for S5 modal logic, if a being exists in any possible world, then its existence is possible (i.e. it is possibly existent in Kant’s sense) in every possible world. Ordinarily, the logical possibility that P is modally consistent with the logical possibility that Not P, i.e. these are not mutually exclusive in a world. In this case, however, we find an exception to this rule due to very nature of such a being as expressed in the concept of materially necessary being. For reasons we have seen, I cannot conceive of a materially necessary being as a merely possibly existent being in any world, but only as materially necessary in such a way as to exclude the material possibility of its non-existence in that world. Otherwise, I have not conceived of a materially necessary being in that world. Thus, if there is any world in which such a being is materially possible, such that it is possibly existent in every world, then its possible non-existence is excluded in every world. In that case, there is no world in which a materially necessary being is possibly non-existent, and such a world thus exists in every world.

Secondly, we can directly show that a metaphysically necessary being will also be a logically necessary one as well. We can conceive of a being as non-existent in a world by supposing that its essence fails to be instantiated or exemplified in that world. In the case of a metaphysically contingent being, this is easily done, since such beings are by nature indifferent to existence and thus can be conceived of as possibly non-existent in some world W, such that it is an open question whether it exists in that world. However, since a metaphysically necessary being is both infinite and conceived of as possessing an essence that is not indifferent to existence, it cannot be conceived of except as actual – as we have just seen. Now, such a being either exists in W or it does not. In accordance with what we have said in the preceding paragraph, we will be able to conceive of that being as non-existent in W only if we can conceive of that being’s essence as indifferent to existence in W. We can conceive of this, in turn, only if we can conceive of that essence as indifferent to existence *as such*. However, as we have seen, this is not conceivable in the case of a materially necessary being. Therefore, there is no world in which we can conceive of a materially necessary being as non-existent. As such, we must conceive of it as existing in every possible world and thus as a logically necessary being. Since the actual world is a possible world, and whatever is necessary is actual, we must conclude that a metaphysically necessary being exists in the actual world.

One naturally protests that it seems perfectly conceivable that no such being exists. Hume, for example, would claim that there is no apparent or obvious contradiction in the assertion that a materially necessary being, as we have defined it does not exist. However, in accordance with my earlier analysis, this at most establishes the formal possibility of such a claim, which while necessary for logical possibility falls short of establishing it. The non-existence of such a being is at best intrinsically epistemically possible by this standard. However, given the analysis of the concept of materially necessary being that we have developed here, a materially necessary being exists in such a way as to exclude the material possibility of its own non-existence. Since in the case of such a being material possibility entails actuality, the possibility that such a being might fail to exist is thereby excluded. The non-existence of such a being, then, is not conceivable given this fuller understanding of this concept. As such, the non-existence of such a being fails to be extrinsically epistemically possible, and thus fails to be logically possible as well, since the former is a necessary condition for the latter.

Further, to adapt a point made by Anselm of Canterbury in the *Proslogion*, no one can deny the existence of a metaphysically necessary being without understanding, and thus conceiving, of that which he denies.[[3]](#footnote-3) So if anyone can even coherently deny that such a being exists, then such a being must exist, since its actual existence is a definitional consequence of that concept as fully understood. On the other hand, if we cannot conceive of such a being, then neither can we deny that it exists. So in no case can we succeed in coherently denying that a metaphysically necessary being exists. The non-existence of such a being is therefore inconceivable *tout court*. As Anselm also notes, its *apparent* conceivability is merely the result of failing to fully grasp the content/implications of the concept of God; intrinsic epistemic possibility is mistaken for logical and material possibility. Once this is seen, the apparent conceivability of the non-existence of such a being is shown to be just that – apparent and not real, a mere intellectual will o’ the wisp.

Further, to suggest that the non-existence of a metaphysically necessary being may be inconceivable *for us* but not so *in itself*, as some might following Aquinas, so that it is still possible in some sense that God might not exist, is idling and senseless.[[4]](#footnote-4) Indeed, given the foregoing, we cannot so much as explain what we might mean by such a claim. As such, there is nothing to be made of the idea that this is merely a case of inconceivability in the conceiving. Rather, we are dealing with a case of inconceivability in the conceived. Thus, the non-existence of God is as inconceivable as the existence of square circles or a mountain without a valley. So, just as we affirm the non-existence of these beings in the latter case, so too should we affirm the existence of that being in the former one, and for a parallel reason. In the same way, we should understand Descartes’ dismissal of the possibility that we may be deceived in the results arrived at in the *Meditations* in some unimaginable fashion not as an admission of the irrefutability of skepticism and the impossibility of certainty, but instead a recognition that, like the insanity hypothesis, this suggestion represents no ground for skepticism at all.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Further, the inconceivability of the actual non-existence of such a being gives us a sufficient reason for positing such a being as actual, just as the inconceivability of a non-three-sided triangle gives us a sufficient reason for affirming that all triangles have three sides or the inconceivability of a mountain without a valley gives us a sufficient reason for affirming the claim that every mountain has a valley. It is not an option, then, simply to “deny the thing along with all its predicates” in an arbitrary act that attempts to evade the force of the foregoing considerations by simply *refusing* to posit that being as actual. That would simply be to lapse into nonsense, affirming at one and the same time that it is inconceivable that such a being fail to actually exist and yet, in the teeth of that admission, affirming at the same time that it actually does not. Instead, a reason must be given as to why, despite the fact that the actual non-existence of a materially necessary being is inconceivable, it is nevertheless conceivable without absurdity for us to “deny the thing along with all its predicates” and assert the denial of the claim that such a being actually exists.[[6]](#footnote-6) We have already examined the usual reasons given to justify this claim and found them wanting, and will consider one more before we proceed.

Perhaps the last line of resistance to the foregoing consists in the suggestion that, despite everything that I have said, the non-existence of a materially necessary existence could just be a consequence of the fact that such a being fails to exist *simply* by failing to exist.[[7]](#footnote-7) On this view, while the positive existence of any thing is in need of explanation, its non-existence is not. Non-existence, so to speak, is the default position where beings are concerned, for which no cause or explanation need be given. In that case, one may assert that the materially necessary being sketched above may be such that its nature is not instantiated after all, despite it being impossible for us to conceive how this could be; it is just a surd fact about the universe, and there’s an end on it. However, given the defense of the PSR as a principle of material, as opposed to formal, logic given in my previous paper, the asymmetry between existence and non-existence offered here cannot be sustained. In every case, just as there will be a reason why some propositions are true and others are false, so too for each thing, whether existent or non-existent, there will be some explanation for that fact about the world. In the case of the non-existence of any particular thing, that explanation will consist in a specific set of necessary and sufficient conditions such that, had they obtained at any time T, that thing would have existed at T, along with the observation that this set of conditions failed to obtain at any T. In that case, the failure of those conditions to obtain, which in turn will be explicable in terms of positively existing external conditions that conspire to prevent those conditions from obtaining, accounts for or explains the non-existence of that thing by excluding its positive existence given those positively existing external conditions.

Now, however, given the principle of the excluded middle, every being either exists or fails to exist. There is thus a fact of the matter about the existence of any conceivable being. Given the PSR, then, there will be an explanation, to be given by reference to some set of ontologically prior circumstances, for the fact that a thing either exists or fails to exist. There are thus no surd facts regarding either the existence or non-existence of any conceivable being. In the case of a materially necessary being, however, the nature of such a being altogether excludes the possibility that any set of conditions could possibly exclude its positive existence. Given the PSR, then, the actual existence of such a being is guaranteed by the fact that its non-existence is excluded as an actual matter of fact. Such a being, then, cannot not exist and whatever cannot not exist necessarily exists. So, then, given the foregoing we must conclude that a materially necessary being actually exists. Of course, if such a being was materially impossible, or if there was no way to specify how it could positively exist without an external cause to produce it, the force of this argument would be blunted. However, I believe I have said enough to this point to exclude these two suggestions. In that case, we will be justified in putting these aside and affirming that such a being does, in fact, exist.

Nevertheless, at this point the metaphysically necessary being whose existence we are discussing remains completely unspecified. We are thus led to ask, “What would constitute such a being?” In turning to this question, I shall first consider some candidates for a being of this kind that I believe will not answer to the formal description of this being that we have so far, draw the indicated conclusions from that discussion, and then propose a characterization of that being that will so answer. The being in question remains, at least in this context, a theoretical posit and like other such posits, lie beyond complete specification by our intellects. This may be less than what we would like, but it does not follow that what we can justify is inadequate so far as it goes.

**The Physical Universe is not a Materially Necessary Being** In his *Dialogues* *Concerning Natural Religion* Hume suggests that the material or physical universe might be a necessary being.[[8]](#footnote-8) Hume does not present any analysis of a necessary being in that context, and apparently means nothing more by it than “a being whose existence we properly take to be a surd fact,” which he thinks could apply to the physical universe as well as to some external cause of that universe. Although he could hardly have had in mind the notion of materially necessary being I have been developing here, we can certainly follow up this Humean suggestion in the context of the present analysis. If we do, I think we can easily persuade ourselves that, even on the basis of considerations drawn from the Humean perspective, the physical universe is not such a being.

In the first place, it is doubtful that the physical universe is a *thing* at all in the sense I have been using it here. Although organic theories of the universe have been popular in the past, few any longer think of the physical universe as anything like an individual substance or its proper parts as bound together by internal relations. We now generally regard it as an aggregate or collection of externally related things rather than a thing in its own right over and above the things that make it up, ordered to an overall end that the functioning of its proper parts are intended to serve in the way that the organs and the tissues of the body subserve the overall end of enabling and sustaining the life and health of the body as such.[[9]](#footnote-9) As such, it does not possess a nature or essence in the way that what I have been describing things to possess these. Instead, it is more like a structured or law-governed collection of things and causal processes and thus nothing over and above those things. In that case, “universe,” when applied to the physical universe, is simply a convenient way to refer to the entire realm of observable nature as this is subject to empirical investigation. If this is the case, however, the physical universe cannot be a materially necessary being because it is not a being at all, but merely a collection of beings.

Further, even Hume seems persuaded that the physical universe is not a materially necessary being in the sense I have been developing here. First, it certainly seems that the non-existence of such a universe is formally possible – there is no apparent contradiction in the claim to this effect, so we have to grant that it is intrinsically epistemically possible. Nor do we know anything about the physical universe, or about anything else, that excludes this possibility; barring further knowledge to this effect, we have to conclude that the non-existence of the physical universe is extrinsically epistemically possible as well and thus presumptively logically possible as well.

Of course, none of this will make any difference if we can discover, within the nature of that universe, some essential feature it possesses that excludes the material possibility of its non-existence. However, something Hume says elsewhere seems to deny that this is case, asserting that there is no absurdity in the idea that the entire universe might go out of existence at the next moment.[[10]](#footnote-10) Clearly, to envisage this is to envisage a material possibility. In that case, we can and ought to conclude that there is nothing in the essence or nature of the physical universe taken as such (which, as I have suggested, may itself be improper) that explains why or how it is the case that it exists at any moment of time that it exists. If so, it is a materially contingent being, one that, even if it exists in the actual world, need not have done so. This will hold even if, as Hume was also wont to suppose, that universe has existed for an infinite amount of time in the past. Barring some special reason for supposing otherwise, the fact that its existence at each one of those infinite moments is materially contingent shows that it is materially contingent *tout court*; this will especially be the case if the physical universe is merely a collection or aggregation of things rather than a thing in its own right, over and above the things that make it up. I conclude, then, that the physical universe is not a materially necessary being and thus cannot be regarded as something that contains within its own nature or essence the explanation for its existence.

**Matter is not a Materially Necessary Being** Many philosophers, such as Hume and Bede Rundle, have suggested that matter, conceived of as the stuff of which material things are made and out of which they arise, might be a materially necessary being. Perhaps, says Hume, if we were to fully understand the nature of matter, we would discover within it the cause or reason for its existence.[[11]](#footnote-11) If such were to happen, then matter would apparently meet the necessary and sufficient conditions for being classed as a materially necessary being. Rundle, who argues that it is impossible for nothing to exist, denies that this logically entails that a necessary being exists; however, if such a thing is wanted, he proposes matter as the most likely candidate for such a being.[[12]](#footnote-12)

One point in favor of such a view, emphasized by Kant, is the notion that matter is governed by conservation principles that dictate the amount of matter in the universe (or, perhaps, of the total aggregate amount of matter and energy) remains constant at all times and often expressed as the claim that matter can neither be created nor destroyed. In his *Metaphysical Principles of Natural Science*, Kant attempts to prove that the conservation of matter is an *a priori* truth about nature provable by theoretical reason.[[13]](#footnote-13) Like nearly all of Kant’s arguments for his views, Kant scholars regard this argument as unsuccessful. Even if it were, however, on Kant’s own principles such a proof would apply only to the world of phenomena, not to matter considered as a substance or “thing-in-itself.” Further, there are positive arguments for rejecting the material necessity of matter on these grounds.

A good deal of the controversy rests on the nature of laws, a subject we cannot take up here at any length. Most philosophers of science treat the laws of nature either as mathematical principles, in which case they are abstract beings like the principles of geometry, or as descriptive principles grounded in the nature of matter considered as a concrete, existing thing. On the first view, laws as abstract entities fail to have any sort of causal or productive power and are at best idealized descriptions drawn from observation of phenomena to which nature itself can at best be expected to approximate. On the second view, these principles are derivative from, and thus ontologically dependent on, the natures of the entities whose behavior they describe.[[14]](#footnote-14) Even if those principles are justified by reference to the nature of matter, it does not follow that these laws are necessary principles considered in themselves. It certainly seems that a system of laws of nature could exist in which matter is not conserved, or in which the aggregate amount of matter and energy does not remain constant through time. Given that we have not discovered something about the nature of matter that rules out the material or physical possibility of such a scenario, we are justified in entertaining its logical possibility, in which case there is a possible world in which matter or the ratio of matter to energy in nature is not conserved. On this score, then, matter is not a materially necessary being.

In arguing that it is impossible for nothing to exist, Rundle (as did Jonathan Edwards) appeals to our inability to imagine such a thing.[[15]](#footnote-15) The best we can do, he says, is imagine empty space, which is not, after all, nothing. This seems to be correct, though whether Rundle has proved his point remains debatable. At the same time, given Hume’s commitment to the conceivability or imaginability criterion for possibility, it is hard to show how *he* could gainsay Rundle’s claim here. Nevertheless, one wants to ask, in imagining a possible world in which there exists nothing but empty space (conceived of as a Newtonian absolute container space) have we not at the same time coherently conceived of a world containing neither material things nor matter? If so, then non-existence of matter is at least formally, hence intrinsically epistemically, possible. Given that we have no reason to suppose that such a scenario is extrinsically epistemically impossible, it is presumptively logically possible. In that case, and supposing we discover nothing otherwise, then there will be a possible world in which there are no material things and no matter. In that case, matter is not a materially necessary being. The search for an account of such a being, then, continues.

**A Materially Necessary Being exists independently of the Physical Universe** I argued earlier in this paper that an analysis of the concept of materially necessary being excludes the conceivability of the material possibility of that being’s non-existence, making it impossible to even so much as coherently assert the denial of the existence of such a being and that our apparent ability to do so is the result of confusing formal with logical possibility. Having just examined two possible candidates for the status of materially necessary being and have found that neither of them are plausibly conceived of as materially necessary being, we are forced to conclude that this being, whatever it may be, is neither a material thing nor matter itself. It is thus an immaterial or non-physical being, at least in the minimal sense that it is neither constituted by matter or describable using the categories of physics, limited as these are to the physical world. Such a being is therefore, though part of the universe in the sense that the universe is simply the collection of that is, is not part of nature insofar as this refers to the observable, physical universe of material things studied by natural science. Such a being, then, exists in addition to the physical universe. Given its status as materially necessary, it is thus best described as a supernatural being, in at least the minimal sense that this being exists without being subject to or limited by the laws of nature and thus as superior to or “above” nature as understood in accordance with those laws.

Yet this materially necessary being is, as yet, completely unspecified in any positive fashion. Although we are justified in positing such a being insofar as we cannot conceive of its non-existence, this does not supply us with any concrete, positive notion of such a being, or indeed, of such beings – for nothing we have said to this point rules out the possibility that there may be more than one such being. We must therefore consider whether and how this notion can, if at all, acquire a positive meaning.

**Materially Necessary Being contrasted with Materially Contingent Being** In an earlier essay in this series I identified the real separability of existence from essence (nature considered in the abstract) as the hallmark of materially contingent being. The reason that a materially contingent being is contingent, i.e. existing under some conditions and not others, is because its essence is indifferent to existence, and thus needs an external cause for its existence at every moment that it exists. It is only for this reason that the prevention or removal of the requisite necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of a materially contingent being can bring about that it no longer exists. By contrast, a materially necessary being will be one that is capable of existing at every moment, regardless of any external conditions. Such a being will not be such as to be indifferent to existence and will possess a nature of a sort that altogether excludes the material possibility of its non-existence. Another way to put this is to say that, in such a being, essence and existence are identical, and thus not such that they are even in principle separable from one another. Such a being is such that its essence *is* to exist.

These are hard sayings, seemingly unintelligible to many – including myself for many years.[[16]](#footnote-16) To say the essence of a materially necessary being is simply to exist suggests that such a being has just one essential property – to exist, which at best suggests that such a being is an undifferentiated, characterless “act of existence” which *is* without *being* *anything* in particular at all. If this is all that the notion of materially necessary being amounts to, it is hardly worth the effort to deny that there is such a being, so little does it matter whether or not it exists. However, this is not the only way we can think about such a being. Instead, we can conceive of such a being as one for which essence *follows* existence instead of arbitrarily limiting it and possesses the essence appropriate to the act of existence when it is allowed to fully express itself in an unlimited fashion in accordance with its own internal dynamic principle. To conceive of existence in this way is to suppose that the potentiality *for* existence is expressed, actualized, or realized *in* and *through* activity-as-such, resulting in a mode of being that constitutes not just another being, i.e. one more being among others, but instead Being Itself, the unsurpassable epitome of being of which all other, metaphysically contingent beings are simply partial, limited, and incomplete expressions.

Here at last we arrive at the outline of a positive conception of a materially necessary being. At this point, the notion of such a being is still little better than a Kantian regulative idea and our rule for predication for such a being still little more than the following familiar formula: deny any and all limitation to this being and attribute to it all positive predicates to in a manner appropriate to its mode of being. The use of this rule (which may ultimately amount to little more than a criterion) is intended to fill out this notion in the form of a theoretical conception, itself only partial, incomplete, and revisable in principle, of materially necessary being. The results of this investigation will constitute the positive content of this notion, which while hardly complete or exhaustive is nevertheless both adequate as far as it goes and appropriate to the limitations of our sense-dependent intellect.

Venerable philosophical tradition characterizes materially necessary being, so conceived, as a perfect being, or a being that possesses all perfections formally or eminently. Although some have claimed to find contradictions in this idea, I think we show that these claims are groundless in principle. Following Kurt Gödel, let us characterize a *positive attribute* as any predicate that adds content to the concept of a thing taken in itself (as opposed to merely privative or relational predicates) and thus refers to an inherent property of that thing.[[17]](#footnote-17) In order to show that the concept of a materially necessary being contains a contradiction, I have to be able to show that this concept attributes incompatible predicates to the same subject and thus is formally impossible. However, in the case of a being that possesses all perfections, these positive attributes will exist in that thing in such a way that they will be *internally* related, and thus not analyzable apart from each other or even from all the others. Because of this, there will be no contradiction in the concept of that being capable of being demonstrated by anyone. Thus, the essence of such a being will itself be *simple* in such a way that, as Augustine puts it, though the words we use to apply to such a being have different meanings and qualify that being in different ways, nevertheless all those terms have the same referent.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Further, understanding materially necessary being as a perfect being, i.e. a being that possesses all perfections in the way just described, it would seem that there could be at most one such being. If there were two, then they would have to be individuated in some way. This could not be through having different attributes, since by definition a perfect being possesses all positive attributes either formally or eminently and does so, presumably, in the most perfect possible combination. Nor could one such being lack an attribute that the other lacked, for in that case it would not be a perfect being after all. Finally, since such beings would be immaterial and non-physical, they could not be distinguished by possessing different spatial or temporal predicates. Since there is no available criterion for individuating multiple perfect beings, we can only conclude that *at most* one such being exists. Having previously shown that *at least* one such being exists, we are now able to conclude that *exactly* one such being exists.

The materially necessary being above described has a traditional name: the God of the philosophers. This being, apprehended by pure reason and posited as actual on the basis of the conceptual analysis we have presented in this paper, bids fair to the constitute the ultimate and fundamental reality in the universe. Nevertheless, like the Aristotelian God, it seems too distant, too self-contained, and superior to the world of materially contingent beings to be anything more than a mere theoretical posit. While such a God can function as the largely unknown and perhaps unknowable capstone of reality, an ideal of reason that promises a final resting place for theoretical inquiry in which all questions are answered, it still seems a goal too distant for any practicable inquiry to actually achieve. Conceived as such, it hardly seems to be anything that can matter to us very much. However, in the last paper in this series, I will argue that this materially necessary being is not merely the *omega* of theoretical inquiry, but rather, in accordance with the plan of Kant’s *Beweisgrund*, its *fons et origo* as well.

1. Descartes, in *Replies to the First Set of Objections*, in *CSM,* Vol. II, 80; he further explains himself along the lines I have adapted here in the replies to the Fourth Set of Objections, *CSM,* II, 164-171. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Steven M. Duncan, *The Proof of the External World*, London, James Clark, 2008 (hereafter Duncan 2008), 137-142. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion IV* in St. Anselm, *Basic Writings*, S. N. Deane, trans., Chicago, Il., Open Court Publishing Company, 1962, 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, I, Q2, Art 1, c. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See my paper “Descartes and the Crazy Argument,” also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This paragraph is directed against those, such as W. H. Walsh, in *Kant’s Criticism of Metaphysics*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1976, 224 who insist that even if the concept of such a being does in fact contain existence as one of its essential characteristics this still does not prove that such a being exists. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I have discussed this possibility elsewhere; see Duncan (2008), op. cit., 219-222. The following can be considered a further reflection on the issues discussed there. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Richard Popkin, ed., Indianapolis, IL, Hackett, 2nd ed., 1998, part VIII, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. We can therefore dismiss Hume’s claim (op. cit., parts VI and VII, 39-41, 44-48) that the physical universe resembles a plant or an animal as much as it does a machine. It quite obviously does not resemble these things at all, as even causal reflection shows. Even so, the machine analogy itself needs careful handling in order to be made clear. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hume, *Dialogues*, op. cit., part VIII, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hume, *Dialogues*, op cit., 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rundle, op. cit., 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, Michael Friedman, ed. and trans., London, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 80-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Causal Realism of this sort has been defended by Curt J. Ducasse, *Causation and the Types of Necessity*, New York, Dover Press, 1912 and more recently by Rom Harre and E. H. Madden, *Causal Powers*, London, Basil Blackwell, 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Rundle, op. cit., 110-111, and Jonathan Edwards “Of Being” in Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, Edwards Selection, New York, Hill and Wang, 1962, 18-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. It was Austin Farrer’s *Finite and Infinite* (op. cit.) that finally made this notion conceivable for me and even then it took several years of reflection before I was able to rise above old habits of thought and actually embrace this conception. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Gödel’s proof in Judith Jarvis Thomson, ed., *On Being and Saying*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1987, 357-358. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Augustine of Hippo, The Trinity, Edmund Hill, OP, trans., Brooklyn, NY, New City Press, 1991, V, 1, secs. 5-6, and 2, sec. 11, 191-192, and 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)