On a causal principle in an argument for a necessary being

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Pruss and Rasmussen (2018) give an argument for a necessary being employing a modest causal principle. Here, I note that when applied to highly general and fundamental matters, the principle may well be false (or at least not so obvious).

1. The w principle

Arguments from the contingency of some things to the existence of a necessary being rely on causal principles of varying strength. The trick is to find as weak a causal principle as one can that yields a necessary concrete being. Pruss and Rasmussen (2018: Ch. 5) provide us with an argument employing what seems to be such a principle. They call the argument 'the Weak Argument from Beginnings' and the principle it employs 'the very weak causal principle' (the W Principle). Here is the principle:

> **The W Principle.** Normally, for any property *F*, if
>   (*i*)   *F* can begin to be exemplified,
>   (*ii*) *F* can have instances that have a cause,
>   (*iii*) *F* is basic or a determinate of a basic property and
>   (*iv*) there is a determinate of *F* that can be caused to be
>   exemplified, then
> there can be a cause of *F*'s being exemplified.

Pruss and Rasmussen provide three clarifications and a condition. First, a property begins to be exemplified if and only if its exemplification is restricted to a finite interval of time in the past direction (95). Second, 'can' expresses

metaphysical possibility (96). Third, *F* is basic if and only if one can grasp *F* without thereby grasping other properties or relations (97). And fourth, a no-circularity condition: if *x* causes *F* to be exemplified, then *x* is not *F* — or at least, is not *F* just prior to the exemplification of *F* (95).

Now, from the seemingly modest modal claim that

contingency can begin to be exemplified,

Pruss and Rasmussen employ the W Principle in order to argue that a necessary concrete thing exists (where by 'concrete', Pruss and Rasmussen (2) mean 'capable of causation' such that if something is concrete, then possibly it causes something). Here is their argument. Given the above modal claim and that contingency can have instances that have a cause (according to Pruss and Rasmussen, you and I are an example), is a basic or determinate of a basic property (according to Pruss and Rasmussen, it is a determinate of existence) and that *being a contingent human* is a determinate of contingency and can be caused to be exemplified (according to Pruss and Rasmussen, it was caused to be exemplified by our ancestor), it defeasibly follows from the W Principle that there can be a cause of contingency's being exemplified. By the no-circularity condition, such a cause would fail to exemplify contingency and so would be a necessary concrete thing (concrete because it is a cause). Possibly then, a necessary concrete thing exists. But if possibly a necessary concrete thing exists, then a necessary concrete thing exists. And so, or so says the Weak Argument from Beginnings, a necessary concrete thing exists.

2. Consequences of the w principle

The above modal claim is not the only claim we can apply to the W Principle. There are other seemingly modest modal claims. And these also have rather surprising, if not untoward, results. Here are the modal claims:

mereological simplicity can begin to be exemplified;

individuality can begin to be exemplified;

imperfection can begin to be exemplified;

actuality can begin to be exemplified;

existence can begin to be exemplified;

concreteness can begin to be exemplified.[1]

Why are these seemingly *modest* modal claims? Because a denial of any one of them amounts to affirming an instance of the following: necessarily, if *F* is exemplified, then *F* has been eternally or is atemporally exemplified. Take concreteness. If it cannot begin to be exemplified, then necessarily, if it is exemplified, then it has been eternally or is atemporally exemplified. But that is a strong claim.[2]

Employing the reasoning used in the Weak Argument from Beginnings, let us make use of the first of the above claims: simplicity can begin to be exemplified.[3] Given this and that simplicity can have instances that have a cause (possibly, there is an electron that has a cause), is a determinate of a basic property (it is a determinate of existence) and that *being a simple electron* is a determinate of simplicity and can be caused to be exemplified, which seems plausible, it defeasibly follows from the W Principle that there

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[1] Here are other modal claims we can appeal to: temporality, particularity, presentness, reality, consciousness, goodness and rationality can each begin to be exemplified. And like those in the main text, appealing to these claims also has surprising, if not untoward, results.

[2] Most of these modal claims entail the falsity of classical theism. Does this count against their modesty? No, since classical theism is so *immodest*: according to it, an eternal, simple, particular, concrete being necessarily exists. Since it is no mark against a claim's being modest that it conflicts with an immodest claim, it is no mark against these claims being modest that they conflict with classical theism.

[3] Suppose one thinks that there are simple abstract objects. Then the exemplification of simplicity is not restricted to a finite interval of time in the past since it would be exemplified by abstract, and so atemporal, things. Here then, appeal should be made not to simplicity but to the conjunctive property simplicity & concreteness (Pruss and Rasmussen (100, fn. 5) have no problem appealing to conjunctive properties in this way). This avoids the worry. Moreover, this strategy generalizes. If you think that there are individual, imperfect, actual or existent abstract objects, then appeal should be made, below, to individuality & concreteness, imperfection & concreteness, actuality & concreteness or existence & concreteness.

can be a cause of the exemplification of simplicity. By the no-circularity condition, such a cause would fail to exemplify simplicity and so would be mereologically complex. Possibly then, a complex thing exists. And so possibly, mereological nihilism is false. But if possibly false, then false (nihilism is not a contingent thesis).[4]

Let us make use of the second of the above claims: individuality can begin to be exemplified. Given this and that individuality can have instances that have a cause (you and I), is a determinate of a basic property (it is a determinate of existence) and that *being an individual human* is a determinate of individuality and can be caused to be exemplified (it was caused to be exemplified by our ancestors), it defeasibly follows from the W Principle that there can be a cause of the exemplification of individuality. By the no-circularity condition, such a cause would fail to exemplify individuality and so would be a non-individual and so a property. Possibly then, a property causes something. And so possibly, both platonism and nominalism are false. But if possibly false, then false (neither platonism nor nominalism are contingent theses).

Let us make use of the third of the above claims: imperfection can begin to be exemplified. Given this and that imperfection can have instances that have a cause (you and I), is a determinate of a basic property (it is a determinate of existence) and that *being an imperfect human* is a determinate of imperfection and can be caused to be exemplified (it was caused to be exemplified by our ancestors), it defeasibly follows from the W Principle that there can be a cause of the exemplification of imperfection. By the no-circularity condition, such a cause would fail to exemplify imperfection and so would be perfect. Possibly then, a perfect being exists. Assuming, as many

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[4] If we appealed to the conjunctive property simplicity & concreteness, then by the no-circularity condition, such a cause would fail to exemplify simplicity & concreteness and so would either be complex or not concrete. If not concrete, then possibly, an acausal thing causes something! If complex, then mereological nihilism is possibly false and so false. Results of the same kind hold when we appeal to individuality & concreteness, imperfection & concreteness, actuality & concreteness and existence & concreteness.

do, that if perfection is possibly instantiated then it is necessarily instantiated (think here of the modal ontological argument for God's existence), perfection is instantiated. A perfect being exists. (This is a cosmo-ontological argument!)

Let us make use of the fourth of the above claims: actuality can begin to be exemplified. Given this and that actuality can have instances that have a cause (you and I), is a basic property and that *being an actual human* is a determinate of actuality and can be caused to be exemplified (it was caused to be exemplified by our ancestors), it defeasibly follows from the W Principle that there can be a cause of the exemplification of actuality. By the no-circularity condition, such a cause would fail to exemplify actuality and so would be non-actual. Possibly then, a non-actual thing exists. And so possibly, actualism is false. But if possibly false, then false (actualism is not a contingent thesis).

Let us make use of the fifth of the above claims: existence can begin to be exemplified. Given this and that existence can have instances that have a cause (you and I), is a basic property and that *being an existent human* is a determinate of existence and can be caused to be exemplified (it was caused to be exemplified by our ancestors), it defeasibly follows from the W Principle that there can be a cause of the exemplification of existence. By the no-circularity condition, such a cause would fail to exemplify existence and so would be non-existent. Possibly then, a non-existent thing exists!

Finally, let us make use of the last of the above claims: concreteness can begin to be exemplified. Given this and that concreteness can have instances that have a cause (you and I), is a basic or determinate of a basic property (it is a determinate of existence) and that *being a concrete human* is a determinate of concreteness and can be caused to be exemplified (it was caused to be exemplified by our ancestors), it defeasibly follows from the W Principle that there can be a cause of the exemplification of concreteness. By the no-circularity condition, such a cause would fail to exemplify concreteness and so would be acausal. Possibly then, an acausal thing causes something!

This last case (and perhaps the one before it) is particularly noteworthy. Pruss and Rasmussen (104) say that contingency is like other causable properties in that it satisfies all four of the conditions in the W Principle and that there are no clear cases of properties meeting those conditions that *fail* to be causable. But it seems like there is. For concreteness seems to satisfy those conditions but, on pain of an acausal thing absurdly causing something, cannot be causable.

3. The status of the w principle

Given our modest modal claims, here are the above stated defeasible consequences of the W Principle (including the one from the Weak Argument from Beginnings):

> a necessary concrete thing exists;
> mereological nihilism is false;
> platonism and nominalism are false;
> a perfect being exists;
> actualism is false;
> possibly, a non-existent thing exists;
> possibly, an acausal thing causes something.[5]

The proponent of the W Principle has a choice: either this principle applies to every one of the relevant properties — contingency, simplicity, individuality, imperfection, actuality, existence, concreteness — or it does not. If it does, then

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[5] The consequences are actually stronger. For example, given the W Principle, what got us to the rejection of mereological nihilism, platonism and nominalism was that possibly, there is a cause of the exemplification of simplicity and that possibly, there is a cause of the exemplification of individuality. But, being classical theists, Pruss and Rasmussen think that necessarily, God's simplicity and individuality are uncaused. Here then, Pruss and Rasmussen are committed to denying these modal consequences of the W Principle. And they are committed to denying them even if they think that mereological nihilism, platonism and nominalism are false.

not only does a necessary concrete being exist, but the rest of the above consequences hold. (And all this on the basis of a highly restricted causal principle!) If it does not (as seems true since no non-existent thing can exist and no acausal thing can cause something), then at least one of our modest modal claims, listed earlier, is false.[6] Now this is either because all are false or only some are. If all are false, then the principle has lost its current philosophical import (the Weak Argument from Beginnings now has a false premise). If only some are, then we need a non-ad hoc reason for thinking so. What is it about some of these properties (contingency, say) that explains why they, but not the others, can begin to be exemplified?

Here, an old complaint begins to stick: we have a causal principle in a cosmological argument that, when applied to everyday phenomena, seems to be true but when applied to highly general and fundamental matters, starts to look suspect (or at least not so obvious).[7]

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References
Pruss, Alexander & Rasmussen, Joshua 2018. *Necessary Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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[6] You *could* say that the W Principle does not apply to every one of these properties by having it that at least one of them cannot have instances that have a cause, is not a basic or a determinate of a basic property or does not have a determinate that can be caused to be exemplified. But such claims are highly implausible.

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