BRUTE CONTINGENCY AND THE PRINCIPLE
OF SUFFICIENT REASON

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Abstract:

This essay deals with a Leibnizian version of the argument from the contingent existence of the world to the necessary existence of God, especially with the statements of the argument presented by Father Copleston in his famous B.B.C. debate with Bertrand Russell and, more recently, by Richard Taylor, in his Metaphysics. The essay is divided into two parts. In the first part, I am chiefly concerned with showing how the principle of sufficient reason, together with the claim that something contingent exists, will allow us to conclude, without any appeal to the impossibility of an infinite series of contingent causes, that there exists a necessary being distinct from the world of contingent beings. In the second part of the essay, I try to show that, in a form strong enough to support the argument, the principle of sufficient reason has the implication--undesirable to many, but not all theists--that nothing could be logically contingent.
To exist is simply to be there; what exists appears, lets itself be encountered, but you can never deduce it. There are people, I believe, who have understood that. Only they have tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a necessary, causal being. But no necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not an illusion, an appearance to be dissipated; it is absolute, and consequently perfect gratuitousness.

Jean-Paul Sartre

. . . theology recognizes the contingency of human existence only to derive it from a necessary being, that is, to remove it.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

In all of its many versions, the argument from the contingent existence of the world to the necessary existence of God presupposes something like the "principle of sufficient reason." If everything contingent requires some cause or reason why it exists rather than not, then, so the argument goes, there must be a "necessary being" which is the sufficient reason of everything contingent.

What I would like to do here is to explicate and evaluate a suggestion made, but left undeveloped, by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty in the passages quoted above: the suggestion, namely, that the theologian who accepts the metaphysical assumption of the argument from contingency is committed to the view that "brute contingency" is an illusion, an appearance which can at least in principle be dispelled. What commits the theologian to this view, I will argue, is the principle of sufficient reason, since a version of the principle strong enough to yield the desired conclusion (that a necessary being exists) is--in one sense of the word "contingent"--inconsistent with the contingent existence of the world.


Although I will be primarily concerned with the Leibnizian version of the argument, my remarks may be equally applicable to some Thomist versions, and they are particularly pertinent to the versions presented by Father Copleston in his famous BBC debate with Bertrand Russell and, more recently, by Richard Taylor in his Metaphysics.

The essay will be divided into two parts. In the first part, I am chiefly concerned with showing how the principle of sufficient reason, together with the claim that something contingent exists, will allow us to conclude, without any appeal to the impossibility of an infinite series of contingent causes, that there exists a necessary being distinct from the world of contingent beings. In the second part of the essay, I will take a close look at the criticism of the argument suggested by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and try to show in some detail why, in a form strong enough to support the argument, the principle of sufficient reason has the implication—undesirable to many, but not all, theists—that nothing could be logically contingent.

I

Let us begin with a brief statement of the argument from contingency and then try to explicate the principle of sufficient reason in such a way that it is strong enough to assure the validity of the argument.

A typical statement of the argument is that of Father Copleston,

... First of all, I should say, we know that there are at least some beings in the world which do not contain in themselves the reason for their existence. For example, I depend upon my parents, and now on the air, and on food, and so on. Now, secondly, the world is simply the real or imagined


totality or aggregate of individual objects, none of which contain in themselves alone the reason for their existence. There isn't any world distinct from the objects which form it, any more than the human race is something apart from its members. Therefore, I should say, since objects or events exist, and since no object of experience contains within itself the reason of its existence, this reason, the totality of objects, must have a reason external to itself. That reason must be an existent being. Well, this being is either itself the reason for its own existence, or it is not. If it is, well and good. If it is not, then we must proceed farther. But if we proceed to infinity in that sense, then there's no explanation of existence at all. So, I should say, in order to explain existence, we must come to a being which contains within itself the reason for its own existence, that is to say, which cannot not-exist.5

Nowhere in this statement of the argument is there a precise formulation of the principle of sufficient reason. We are told that a contingent being depends upon some being other than itself for the reason of its existence, whereas a necessary being is not similarly dependent. And we are told that no member of a series of merely contingent causes would provide us with a sufficient reason for the existence of the world. But nowhere in the argument do we find a clear formulation of the principle itself. What, then, is a "sufficient reason?" And what things require a sufficient reason?

Here are two of Leibniz's formulations:

... nothing takes place without sufficient reason, that is to say that nothing happens without its being possible for one who has enough knowledge of things to determine why it is thus and not otherwise. This principle having been laid down, the first question we are entitled to ask will be: why is there something rather than nothing? For "nothing"

is simpler and easier than "something." Further, supposing that things must exist, it must be possible to give a reason why they must exist just as they do and not otherwise.  

. . . no fact can be real or existing and no statement true unless it has a sufficient reason why it is thus and not otherwise. Most frequently, however, these reasons cannot be known by us.  

Inadequate as these two quotations are as a statement of the principle, they do suggest an answer to the second of our questions, viz., what things require a sufficient reason? The answer: everything does. Everything that exists (this man, this tree) requires a sufficient reason for the fact that it exists: of every individual existent, we can ask, "why does it exist rather than not-existing?" Similarly, everything that happens (the rising of the sun, the falling of the rain) requires a sufficient reason for the fact that it happens: "Nothing takes place without sufficient reason." Moreover, every true proposition about what exists or occurs ("The sky is blue," "The thunder is loud") requires a sufficient reason for the fact that it is true: "No fact can be real or existing and no statement true unless it has a sufficient reason why it is thus and not otherwise." Finally, we can say that there must be a sufficient reason for the existence of the totality of what exists or occurs, i.e., for the set of all individual entities and events, stretching (perhaps) infinitely into the past and the future: "Supposing that things must exist, it must be possible to give a reason why they must exist just as they do and not otherwise." For everything, then, that exists or occurs or is the case, the principle requires that there be a reason sufficient to bring it about or sustain it in existence or make it the case.


7. Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, Monadology, paragraph thirty-two, quoted from Ibid., pp. 8-9.
But what is a reason? In the context of the argument under consideration, the word seems to have two different, but related, meanings. In the first place, a "reason" provides the answer to the question, "why?" It provides an explanation of the truth of any proposition. But even if no one ever asked for an explanation, the principle asserts that the "answer" would still be "there," "in things," so to speak. The reason for something is its cause: that which makes it exist or occur or be the case; and the principle asserts that everything--each individual thing and the totality of all individual things--has a cause.

What, then, is a sufficient reason? The answer characteristic of the philosophical rationalism which underlies the argument under consideration is that a sufficient reason is a cause which in and of itself necessitates its effect. Given the cause, the effect must occur. If the cause did not by itself necessitate the effect, if some other condition were requisite, then it would not be the sufficient reason of its effect. There would be no answer to the questions: why something and not nothing? why thus and not otherwise? But since it is always possible in principle to answer these questions--"one who has enough knowledge of things" could do it--there must be a reason for everything, a complete cause which necessitates the being and the being-thus-and-not-otherwise of everything.

Before we can grasp the full import of the principle of sufficient reason, however, one further point must be made explicit. It concerns the nature of causation and the concept of a necessary being. The problem is that the mere assertion that everything has a cause might seem to imply that everything is caused by something other than itself. Such an assumption would not only generate an infinite regress of causes; it would actually be in conflict with the conclusion of the argument from contingency. For the object of the argument is to demonstrate the existence of a being which depends upon nothing other than itself. The principle of sufficient reason must therefore be understood to require that everything have a cause either (1) in something other than itself or (2) in itself.

It is difficult for the modern mind to grasp the idea of a being which contains in itself the cause (reason) of its own existence. It certainly is not the idea of something which brings itself into existence. For that would require that the self-caused being exist before it
comes into existence, a notion which a rationalist would find as absurd and self-contradictory as any empiricist. But then what does it mean to say that something is the cause of itself? Spinoza gave the answer: "By cause of itself, I understand that whose essence involves existence; or that, whose nature cannot be conceived unless existing." A necessary being, then, in contrast to a contingent being, is self-explanatory in that its essence involves existence. If we ask why it exists, the answer is that it exists in virtue of its own nature, and not in virtue of the activity of something other than itself, as in the case of a contingent being. It is not surprising, therefore, that the great seventeenth century rationalists were united in their acceptance of the ontological argument. If God is a necessary being whose essence involves existence, then surely it is self-contradictory to deny that he exists. But the idea of a being that is necessary in this sense is embodied in the argument from contingency no less than in the ontological argument.

To sum up, if the principle of sufficient reason is to be given a form strong enough to support the argument from contingency, it must be understood in such a way that: (1) it allows for the possibility of a necessary being, i.e., for the possibility of a being which contains the sufficient reason of its own existence; (2) it requires that there be a sufficient reason for everything, including the set of all individual entities and events.

Bearing these points in mind, we can better understand the argument from contingency. As presented by Father Copleston, it proceeds in two stages. First, we are told that the world, i.e., the "totality or aggregate" of all contingent beings, is itself contingent and thus dependent on something "external to itself." Then it is suggested that an infinite regress of causes contingent upon other causes is impossible, so that "in order to explain existence, we must come to a being that contains within itself the reason for its own existence"—a necessary being.

Two objections arise immediately. (1) Why can't there be an infinite series of contingent causes, each dependent for its existence on some earlier member of the series? Copleston says that if there were, there would be "no

8. Ethics, as translated by W. H. White, First Part, Definition I.
explanation of existence at all." I will argue later that this claim contains a genuine insight, but it is not immediately obvious that it does. For if each member of the series has the sufficient reason of its existence in some other member, then each member has an explanation, and it may well be asked what is left unexplained.

(2) But even if we could not be satisfied with an infinite regress of contingent causes, we might well ask why the series must have a single individual at its terminus. Might not the sufficient reason of the existence of the world be found in a set of entities that are jointly sufficient for the existence of everything that exists?

I confess myself unable to find a convincing reply to the second of these two objections. It seems not to have occurred to the proponents of the argument that the ultimate reason for the existence of everything might be found in anything other than a single individual. That causes are individual substances seems to have been a central feature of the quasi-Aristotelian ontology that provided the historical context for the argument from contingency. It may be best, therefore, to regard it as a requirement of the principle of sufficient reason itself. Certainly, if the principle is to be given a form strong enough to support the argument, it must be understood in such a way that it requires that the sufficient reason of the existence of everything be found in an individual substance.

If the principle of sufficient reason is understood in this way, the remaining objection to the argument--why not an infinite series of contingent causes?--can be dealt with. It can be shown that the difficulty arises only because of the confusing way in which the argument is usually stated. (Father Copleston is guilty of this confusion, as is Richard Taylor in chapter ten of his Metaphysics.)

The confusion is this. If Copleston has really established in the first part of the argument that the reason of the existence of the world (i.e., of the aggregate of all contingent beings) must lie in some individual substance "external" to the world, then he has already shown, without any appeal to the impossibility of an infinite regress, that it must lie in a necessary being. It is pointless and confusing for Copleston to say of a being "external" to the aggregate of all contingent beings: "Well, this being is either itself the reason for its own existence or it is not. If it is, well and good. If it
is not, then we must proceed farther." It is pointless and confusing because if every being is either contingent or necessary, and if the world is defined as the aggregate of all contingent beings, then any being that is not part of that aggregate must be a necessary being.

Armed with this insight, the proponent of the argument should be able to sidestep the question about an infinite regress, for the argument can be stated in a form that is at least valid without asserting that an infinite series of contingent causes is impossible. This may be done in two different ways.

First, as we have suggested, the principle allows us to ask, with regard to the all-embracing set of everything (i.e., every individual entity), "why does it exist rather than not?" If, as the argument assumes, the entity which provides the answer to our question must be an individual substance, then it must be a member of the all-embracing set of everything. And inasmuch as it contains within itself the sufficient reason of the existence of a set of which it is a member, it must be a necessary being.

Alternatively, we might ask, with regard to the set of all contingent beings, "why does it exist rather than not-existing?" Clearly the entity which provides the answer to this question must be necessary, and not contingent. For if it were contingent, it would belong to the set of all contingent beings; but then it would contain the sufficient reason of a set of which it is a member, in which case it would be necessary, not contingent, and the set of all contingent beings would include a member that is not contingent, a conclusion that is plainly self-contradictory. Since the supposition that the individual substance which contains the sufficient reason of the set of all contingent beings is itself contingent involves a manifest contradiction, we may conclude that the sufficient reason of the set of all contingent beings is a necessary being.

It has been objected to both of these ways of stating the argument that they do not succeed in ruling out the possibility that the sufficient reason for the existence

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9. Whether the argument is sound would depend mainly on whether the principle of sufficient reason is true and reasonable—an issue on which I do not wish to take sides here.
of a set may be found in the existence of each of its members. Each of its members would be a part cause, and all together they would provide a sufficient reason for the existence of the set.

Of course, if the principle of sufficient reason is understood in such a way that the sufficient reason of the existence of every set, including the set of everything, must be an individual being, then the objection does not prove the argument invalid. But it does throw doubt on a key premise. The difficulty, as I have already indicated, is that proponents of the argument seem to take it for granted that the sufficient reason of the existence of everything must be found in an individual being. The absence of any reason for accepting this claim seriously weakens the argument. This much must be conceded to the objection.

But there is more to be said. For even if the principle of sufficient reason does not provide adequate support for an argument with the conclusion that there is an individual necessary being, it might still be regarded as providing good reason for believing that something (perhaps the set of everything) necessarily exists. To see why this is so, we must consider the objection somewhat more closely.

The objection may be understood in at least two different ways. On the one hand, the suggestion might be that all individual beings, taken as an aggregate, jointly contain the sufficient reason of the existence of that aggregate, and that this is the possibility that the argument, as I have presented it, leaves out of account. On the other hand, the suggestion might be that the argument fails to rule out the possibility that each individual contains the sufficient reason of some other individual and depends for its existence on yet another individual and that in this way the existence of the set of all individuals is fully explained. As Hume said: "Did I show you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable, should you afterwards ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty. This is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts."10

10. Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, Part IX.
In the case of the first possibility, I think we would have to say that the set of all individuals would be a necessary being. If the set of all individual beings is simply the collection of all its members and if its members jointly contain the sufficient reason of its existence, it would seem to follow that the set contains the sufficient reason of itself. As long as this possibility is not ruled out, the theist has not succeeded in demonstrating all that he wanted to demonstrate, viz., that there is a necessarily existent individual. But he might still be justified in claiming to have an argument for part of what he wanted to conclude--viz., that something exists necessarily or in virtue of its own nature.

If the objection is taken in the second way, I believe it can be rejected outright. As William Rowe has pointed out in his recent book, The Cosmological Argument, the objection presupposes that the following principle is universally true: "If the existence of every member of a set is explained the existence of the set is thereby explained." Rowe suggests—correctly, I think—that the principle is not universally applicable. Suppose, for example, that the set of all men is infinite (there have always been men) and that it constitutes a series in which each individual man is contingent upon and fully explained by a preceding member of the series. Then we have an explanation of the existence of each man, but no explanation of the fact that there have always been men. Why should there ever have been any men at all? It is no answer to point out that each member of the set of men was generated by another member of that set. It would be an answer to point out that something else—something that is not a member of the set of men—has always been causing men to exist. But if no such answer were available, then only two alternatives would remain—either the set of men is self-explanatory in that it contains the sufficient reason of its own existence or, contrary to the principle of sufficient reason, there is no reason why there should


12. Nor would there be any explanation of the fact that there has been just this infinite series of men rather than any other logically possible series.
ever have been such a set. In the first case, the set would itself be a necessary being. In the second, it would be a "brute" fact that there have always been men—a fact without any explanation whatsoever.

Now let us consider the set of everything. Its membership is either finite or infinite. If it is finite, the objection fails. For if it is finite, not every member could be dependent upon some other member. There would have to be at least one "uncaused" member. But in that case, not every member of the set of everything would have an explanation and, even on the ground marked out by the objection, we would have to say that there is no explanation of the existence of anything at all.

But if the set of everything is infinite, it might seem that every member could depend for its existence on some other member and that there need be no first uncaused member. No doubt. But the case would now be analogous to that of the infinite set of men—except that whereas in that case we had the whole of non-human reality to consider when we asked why there should ever have been any men, in this case there is no "remainder of reality" to consider—we are already speaking of a set that includes everything. Every member might have the sufficient reason of its existence in some other member, but there would be no sufficient reason why there should ever have been anything at all. If, therefore, the principle of sufficient reason is accepted, we would have to conclude that something (either some individual or some set of individuals) exists necessarily.

I believe this is the insight behind the traditional denial of an infinite regress of contingent causes. It is not that there could not be an infinite series of contingent causes. It is rather that the set of all causes must include at least one member that is not contingent. Otherwise there would be no sufficient reason for the existence of anything at all. As Copleston put it, there would be "no explanation of existence at all." There would be no answer to the first question Leibniz tells us the principle of sufficient reason entitles us to ask: "Why is there something rather than nothing?"

13. Unless there were a kind of causal circle ("a is the cause of b, b the cause of c, and c the cause of a") in which every member of the circle is at least indirectly cause of itself, and so a necessary being.
II

Now we are in a position to understand why Sartre and Merleau-Ponty hold that the argument, which begins with the recognition of contingency, ends by abolishing it. For the principle of sufficient reason, in a form strong enough to support the argument, amounts to the demand that everything either be logically necessary or be deducible from something which is logically necessary. This table, this tree, this man, to be sure, are contingent in the sense of "contingent upon," "dependent upon" something other than themselves; but if the principle of sufficient reason, and the argument which it supports are accepted, then they are not logically contingent. For their existence is (logically) necessary. The clear implication is that there is nothing which could (logically) have failed to exist (or occur or be the case); and, in that sense, that nothing exists contingently. That, of course, is precisely the sense in which Sartre and Merleau-Ponty are speaking of contingency when they accuse the theologian of inconsistency. When they affirm that something exists contingently, they do not simply mean that it is "contingent upon" something other than itself; they mean that it could (in principle) have failed to exist. The contingency of my own existence, for example, consists in the fact that I—who most assuredly do exist—might (logically) not have existed at all. Whether this logical sense of contingency is the one involved in the first premise of the argument varies, of course, from exponent to exponent. Leibniz himself seems to have wavered on the point; his distinction between "moral" and "metaphysical" necessity, to which I will return shortly, is probably to be understood as an attempt to avoid facing up to the obvious implications of his position. Richard Taylor, on the other hand, in his contemporary defense of the argument, begins quite explicitly with logical contingency, and fails to see the necessitarian implications of the argument as he states it. This much, however, seems clear. If logical contingency is the sense in which the world is said to be contingent, then the argument is inconsistent. And if anything is truly contingent in this strong sense, then the principle on which the argument rests is false. That this is so may be seen as follows. Let G be the individual which contains the final, sufficient reason of the existence of the world, where "world" is defined as the set of all contingent beings. In accordance with the principle of sufficient reason, we can say:
(1) Necessarily if G exists, then the world exists;

and

(2) Necessarily G exists.

It follows that:

(3) Necessarily the world exists.

Doubtless, as Leibniz was careful to note, we do not have enough independent knowledge of whatever necessary beings there may be to move deductively from the assertion of the existence of a particular necessary being to the assertion of the existence of a particular contingent being, say this man or this tree. But if it is true that for any contingent being or set of contingent beings, there is a necessary being which contains the sufficient reason of that being or set of beings, it should be possible in principle to do so. And if this is so, we have all the information we need to draw the conclusion that nothing that exists is such that it could (logically) fail to exist.

There is, however, an obvious line of defense for those who wish to accept the argument, but are uncomfortable with its necessitarian implications. Someone may remind us that the mere existence of God is not the sufficient reason of the existence of the world. Something else is required, viz., that God should decide to create the world. Moreover, it may be suggested that in my treatment of the principle of sufficient reason, I have conflated and confused "having a reason" for doing something with "being caused" to do something (whether by an external cause or by one's own essence). If these suggestions are correct, our theologian has a ready comeback. "God didn't have to create the world," he might say. "But it doesn't follow from that that He just 'happened' to create the world, that there isn't any reason why He chose to do so. On the contrary, the world is an expression of His perfect knowledge, goodness and power; He created it because more being is better than less, and because of all the worlds He could have created, He knew this to be the best possible one. Thus your conclusion--'Necessarily this world exists'--doesn't follow. This world didn't have to be at all. God freely chose to create it."

That this line of defense is inadequate may be seen as follows. Either perfect goodness, knowledge, and power are contingent properties of God or they are not. If we
say that they are contingent properties, then we have failed to arrive at a final, sufficient reason for the existence of the world. Our argument has ended in a merely contingent state-of-affairs, of which, in accordance with the principle of sufficient reason, we can still ask, "why thus and not otherwise?" But if, on the other hand, we say that the goodness, knowledge, and power of God are not contingent properties of God, we must go on to ask whether His perfection in these respects necessitates His act of creation. If they do not necessitate it, then once again we are left with a contingent state of affairs for which there is no sufficient reason. But if they do necessitate it, then the existence of the world is not contingent: the world could not fail to exist. That this is so may be seen as follows. From

(1) Necessarily God exists; and
(2) Necessarily God is perfect in goodness, knowledge, and power; and
(3) Necessarily if God is perfect in goodness, knowledge, and power, He creates the world;¹⁴ and
(4) Necessarily if God creates the world, the world exists; it follows that
(5) Necessarily the world exists.

To deny any of the premises of the argument would be to leave us with a merely contingent state of affairs for which there is no sufficient reason. But to accept them leads infallibly to the conclusion that the world is not logically contingent.

¹⁴ Leibniz himself seems to have accepted this implication of the principle of sufficient reason. See for example, the "Theodicy," where he writes: "Now this supreme wisdom, united to a goodness that is no less infinite, cannot but have chosen the best . . . . (I)f there were not the best among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any . . . . (T)here is an infinitude of possible worlds among which God must needs have chosen the best, since he does nothing without acting in accordance with supreme reason." Leibniz, Theodicy, ed. by Diogenes Allen, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. 35. What I have been at pains to argue is that if Leibniz is right in accepting the principle of sufficient reason in so strong a form as this, he must be wrong in supposing that there is more than one possible world.
Of course, as we have seen, it is still possible to hold that the world is contingent in the sense of "contingent upon" something other than itself. Even if there were nothing such that it could (logically) have failed to be, some things might be causally dependent upon other things. And the assertion that there is a being which is contingent in this sense, together with the principle of sufficient reason, would generate a valid argument for the existence of a being which is necessary in itself, and not necessitated by something other than itself. Interpreted in this way, the argument is not inconsistent; it does not begin with contingency and end by abolishing it. But Sartre and Merleau-Ponty are surely right in calling our attention to an implication which the advocates of the argument are not wont to emphasize: the implication, viz., of complete logical and metaphysical determinism. In a form strong enough to yield the desired conclusion, the principle of sufficient reason implies that nothing, including, it is worth noting, human actions, could be other than it is. Our experience of freedom, on the one hand, and of brute contingency, on the other, are mere "illusion, an appearance which can at least in principle be dissipated." Contingency—in the more interesting sense of the word—is but necessity not yet understood.

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