THE PRINCIPLE OF NECESSARY REASON

John O'Leary-Hawthorne and Andrew Cortens

Cosmological arguments have fallen on hard times of late. The main reason
for this is that such arguments have traditionally deployed the problematic
Principle of Sufficient Reason. In this paper, we explore a different strategy
for constructing a cosmological argument. In part 1, we first briefly explain
why the Principle of Sufficient Reason is highly questionable. Second, we
introduce and motivate the Principle of Necessary Reason. In part 2, we
construct an argument that deploys the latter principle, refining it in the face
of a number of objections.

Cosmological arguments for the existence of God derive whatever force they
have from the intuition that contingent things depend for their existence on
something else. Unfortunately, most traditional attempts to turn this intuition
into an argument have employed some version of the Principle of Sufficient
Reason (hereafter, 'PSR'). As a number of writers have noted, we cannot
consistently maintain an unrestricted version of this principle while maintain-
ing that some beings are contingent. Thus we cannot argue for a necessary
being on the basis of contingency in the world by employing PSR. On the
other hand, if we restrict this principle to a certain class of truths, the result
is liable to seem ad hoc. In this paper, we shall explore a rather different
strategy for building an argument out of the intuition mentioned above. This
paper will be divided into two parts. In part 1, we briefly outline the problem
that arises for PSR, and introduce the Principle of Necessary Reason as an
alternative to it. In part 2, we attempt to construct a plausible version of the
Cosmological Argument which deploys the Principle of Necessary Reason.

Part 1

The fundamental problem for PSR is that it conflicts with the claim that there
are contingent truths. This claim is not only plausible in its own right, but is
an indispensable starting point for those who try to argue for a necessary
being upon which the universe depends. What is a sufficient reason for a
contingent truth P? It seems like it will have to be some truth Q that entails
P (where Q entails P is understood as $\Box(Q \supset P)$), and which is not entailed
by P. (The last clause is needed, or else PSR would be trivially satisfied on
account of the fact that each contingent truth entails and is entailed by itself.)
We can construct the following reductio against the claim that every contin-

gent truth has a sufficient reason. (What follows is basically the argument presented by Peter van Inwagen in *An Essay On Free Will.*[1]) Take the conjunction of all contingent truths, which of course will itself be contingent. If PSR is true, then there must be a sufficient reason for that conjunction, which will be a truth other than the conjunction itself that is sufficient for the truth of the conjunction. Call the reason R. R is either necessary or contingent. If it is contingent, it must be part of the conjunction. But any part of the conjunction is entailed by it and so can't count as a sufficient reason. Thus R will have to be necessary. But any truth entailed by a necessary truth will be itself necessary. So we arrive at the conclusion that the conjunction of contingent truths is necessary, which is a contradiction.

To sidestep this problem, one can restrict PSR in some way. For example, in his commentary on Samuel Clarke's famous cosmological argument, William Rowe suggests the following principle on Clarke's behalf:

> Every existing thing has a reason for its existence (where by "reason", Rowe means "sufficient reason") either in the necessity of its own nature or in the causal efficacy of some other being. (Call this 'PSR 2'.)[2]

Aside from the worry that such restrictions may seem arbitrary, it seems that quantum mechanics, if true, provides counterexamples to PSR both in an unrestricted and restricted form. For if it is undetermined how the world will unfold, then it is reasonable to suppose that it will be undetermined exactly which beings will come into existence and when.[3]

Let us return once again to the intuition that guides the cosmological argument, stated in the first sentence of this paper. An important point to notice is that when we say something of the form A depends on B, we do not take ourselves to be asserting that B is sufficient for A. For example, when I say that I depend for my existence upon my parents, I do not mean to imply that my parents could not have existed without my existing too. What I am claiming, rather, is that if my parents hadn't existed, I wouldn't have existed. Thus when we say that A depends on B, we are at most claiming that B is *necessary* for A, not that B is sufficient for A. Probably, we are claiming something even weaker, namely, that at the closest worlds at which A exists, B exists. We can thus usefully distinguish two notions of dependency; call them weak and strong dependency.

> A strongly depends on B = It is not possible that A exist without B existing. (i.e. At every world at which A exists, B exists.)

> A weakly depends on B = If B hadn't existed, A wouldn't have existed. (i.e. At the closest worlds where B doesn't exist, A doesn't exist.)

Given all this, we see that it is inappropriate to cash out the intuition that everything *depends* on something in terms of PSR. Rather, we should look for principles that employ one or other notion of dependency spelled out

above. One can employ principles that range over beings or propositions about beings. For ease of exposition, we shall begin with principles of the former sort, though we shall see later why principles of the latter sort might be preferred. Thus we offer the following two principles, corresponding to each type of dependency.

> Principle of Necessary Reason 1: Every contingent thing is strongly dependent on something or other that is distinct from it.[4]

> Principle of Necessary Reason 2: Every contingent thing is weakly dependent on something or other that is distinct from it.

These principles may be true, but they are both too weak to plausibly capture the intuition expressed in the first sentence of this paper. Many things depend for their existence on one or more of their proper parts. For example, a plant depends strongly and weakly for its existence on its stem. But when defenders of the cosmological argument claim that a plant depends on something else for its existence, they presumably take themselves to be asserting that it depends for its existence on something *external* to it. We can accommodate this point as follows:

> PNR 1': Every contingent thing is strongly dependent on something or other that is distinct from it and every part of it.

> PNR 2': Every contingent thing is weakly dependent on something or other that is distinct from it and every part of it.

It may be objected that only a principle of *sufficient* reason captures the causal relation that is connoted by 'reason,' and hence that the notion of a non-sufficient reason is strained. This rests upon a misunderstanding of our ordinary concept of causation. I might cause Jones's death by pulling the trigger even if his death depends in part upon factors external to me. (For example, that the gun was loaded.) Moreover, as Anscombe and others have reminded us,[5] our concept of causation allows that a cause need not be determining, even when considered in conjunction with the totality of concurrent conditions. If I pull the trigger and, given the way the world is, it is only 70 per cent likely that Jones will die, and he dies, then it will still be appropriate to say that I caused his death.

Part 2

In what follows, we shall seek to construct a Cosmological Argument for the existence of a necessary being upon which the cosmos depends.

1. There is a collection of all past, present, and future contingent beings.

2. If a collection has contingent members, then the collection is contingent.

3. Every contingent being weakly depends on something that is distinct from it and every part of it.

4. Therefore, there is (at least) one necessary being upon which the collection of contingent beings weakly depends.

To see that this is a valid argument, consider the collection of all past, present and future contingent beings, which is guaranteed by (1). (Call it 'Jones'.) Jones is contingent (by 2). There is something which is not Jones and is not a part of Jones upon which Jones depends (by 3). (Call it 'God'.) God is necessary or contingent. God can't be contingent, since God isn't part of Jones and every contingent being is a part of Jones. Hence God is necessary. (Of course, the argument does not secure something answering to the Judaeo-Christian conception of God. That would be expecting too much of any cosmological argument.)

Obviously, if one wished to argue for the stronger conclusion that the collection of contingent beings strongly depends upon a necessary being, one could reconstruct the argument, using strong dependency in the premises. We employ the weak dependence principle because it is weaker and therefore more plausible.

The argument does not spell trouble for the thesis that there are contingent beings, since it does not employ PSR. To reiterate, the conclusion does not imply that the necessary being upon which Jones depends is sufficient, by its very existence, for the existence of Jones. Moreover, the argument relies in no way on the controversial assumption that the cosmos had a beginning in time, as some cosmological arguments have done. We shall now refine the argument a little by considering some objections and replies.

Objection 1: The argument is valid but, if sound, leads to an infinite hierarchy of necessary beings. Consider the collection that is composed of Jones and God. (Call it 'Jones*'.) Presumably, if Jones is a contingent being, so is Jones*. After all, they both have contingent beings among their parts. Premise (3) implies that there exists a being upon which Jones* depends for its existence which is neither Jones* nor part of Jones*. Thus we will be able to use the principle to secure the existence of a further necessary being, call it 'SuperGod'. Consider next the collection composed of Jones* and SuperGod....

Reply: The principle needs to be stated with a little more care:

3'. Every contingent being weakly depends upon something which is distinct from it and any *contingent* part of it.

We can thus avoid any danger of an infinite regress, since (3)' will not imply that Jones* depends for its existence on something distinct from it and any part of it.

Objection 2: You've proved the existence of a necessary being, and one upon which the collection of all contingent beings depends for its existence. But the being need be nothing more controversial than the number nine. For, by your

criterion of dependency, the collection of all contingent beings depends both strongly and weakly for its existence on the number nine. After all, at all the worlds at which the collection exists, the number nine exists (and *a fortiori*, at all the closest worlds at which the collection exists, the number nine exists).

Reply: We agree that a cosmological argument which secured nothing more controversial than the existence of the number nine would not satisfy the natural theologian. Thus, again, the argument needs refinement. There are two ways that this might be done:

> 3″. Every contingent being weakly depends *in a causal way* on something distinct from it and every contingent part of it.

or,

> 3‴. Every contingent being weakly depends on some *concrete* being which is distinct from it and every contingent part of it.

Objection 3: Your argument presumes the existence of a collection of all past, present and future contingent beings. This is controversial for, first, it is not clear that collections exist and, second, even if there are collections, it is not clear that they can include objects that no longer exist and objects that do not yet exist.

Reply: First, it is not so clear that the collection described in (1) is ontologically problematic. The ontologies of writers such as W. V. Quine and David Lewis certainly make room for such an object. But if one were to become convinced that no such object exists, one could nevertheless capture the thrust of the argument in an ontologically neutral fashion, *viz.*:

> 1*. There is a conjunction of all true contingent singular existence statements.
>
> 2*. A conjunction of contingent statements is itself contingent.
>
> 3*. Every true contingent singular existence statement or conjunction thereof weakly depends for its truth on the truth of some other singular existence statement which isn't a conjunct of it (with a suitable refinement to accommodate Objection 2 above).
>
> 4*. Therefore, there is a necessarily true singular existence statement upon whose truth weakly depends the truth of the conjunction of all true contingent singular existence statements.

The notion of "weakly depends" employed here will obviously have to be explicated somewhat differently than it was in Part 1. There, we were talking about one thing's depending upon another for its existence; here we are talking about one statement's depending upon another for its truth. We can say P weakly depends for its truth upon Q just in case P and Q are true and if Q were false P would be false.[6]

Objection 4: I grant that your principle holds true for non-composite contingent things, but not when it ranges over the whole domain of contingent beings. We should expect to find something on which each particle in the cosmos depends but not some further thing on which the whole cosmos depends. Thus we should only accept:

> Every non-composite thing weakly depends on something that is distinct from it and every part of it. (The last clause is redundant, of course.)

and

> Every contingent thing weakly depends on something else (but not necessarily something that isn't a part of it).

(This objection echoes Hume: "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."[7])

Reply: On your account, we should find considerable conceptual strain in supposing that there could be a world which contained nothing but one atom, but much less conceptual strain in supposing that there could be a world which contained a single piece of granite, composed out of an infinite number of mutually dependent atoms. But we find no difference in conceptual strain here, and neither do you. Hence a compromise position which accepts the dependency principle for atoms but not for larger contingent objects seems quite unpalatable. (Another way of getting at the same point is this: would the intuition go away if we supposed, with Leibniz, that the world of material objects was a world of aggregates all the way down?)

Objection 5: Your argument will not provide the natural theologian with all she wants. For the argument, even if sound, does not guarantee that the necessary being(s) upon which the cosmos depends has(have) enough power to produce that collection.[8]

Reply: First, let us point out one respect in which this argument coheres nicely with the Judaeo-Christian view of how God is related to the world. On that view, God's mere existence isn't sufficient for the existence of the cosmos; rather, an act of willing on His part was required. Our conclusion is perfectly compatible with that claim.

Our argument does not, of course, guarantee that an act of willing on the part of the necessary being(s) was sufficient for the existence of the cosmos. But first, it is dubious whether having it within your power to bring it about that x requires that an appropriate act of willing would be sufficient for x. Is it so clear that when my pulling the trigger is only 70 per cent likely to result in Jones's death, that entails that I do not have it within my power to bring about Jones's death? More importantly, we are happy to concede that this

argument is not going to secure everything that the natural theologian wants. If the conclusion ruled out some claim that the natural theologian held dear, that would be a problem. But if, as in this case, it merely fails to establish every such claim, that only goes to show that the argument doesn't prove every central tenet associated with the Judaeo-Christian conception of God. That doesn't worry us; all we wish to maintain in this paper is that the Principle of Necessary Reason is a valuable resource for natural theology.

Objection 6: Your argument is valid, and may even be sound, but it does not constitute a proof of the existence of a necessary being upon which the collection of contingent beings causally depends. For we have no good reason to believe the principle upon which the argument depends.

Reply: Well, we certainly know of no counterexamples to the principle. (Quantum mechanics, if true, only secures the existence of things for which there is no sufficient reason.) One might even argue, then, that we have good inductive grounds for believing in the principle. At the very least, it does not seem irrational to believe in the principle. Hence, while the argument may fall short of a proof, it indicates that belief in a concrete necessary being upon which the cosmos depends is not irrational.[9]

University of New South Wales
Syracuse University

NOTES

1. Van Inwagen, *An Essay On Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 202-4. For closely related arguments, see James Ross, *Philosophical Theology* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1969), pp. 295-304 and William Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), Chapter 2.

2. Rowe, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

3. Van Inwagen also provides us with good theological reasons for thinking that PSR 2 is false. See "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God" in *Divine and Human Action*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 211-35.

4. It is interesting to note that this principle is entailed by the thesis that every contingent thing has an origin in conjunction with Kripke's famous Necessity of Origins doctrine. See *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

5. See E. Anscombe, *Causality and Determination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

6. Regarding the "suitable refinements" required to meet objection 2: premise three can be altered to read "...depends for its truth on the truth of some other singular existence statement which picks out a concrete being..." Alternatively, we can make use of the concept of causal dependence: a contingent singular existence statement P weakly depends for its truth in a causal way upon another singular existence statement Q just in case P

weakly depends on Q by virtue of a causal relation holding between the being picked out by Q and that picked out by P. A conjunction of singular existence statements P weakly depends in a causal way upon another singular existence statement Q just in case P weakly depends upon Q by virtue of a causal relation holding between the being picked out by Q and one or more of the entities picked out by P.

7. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 1, Part III, Section III.

8. This worry was raised by an anonymous referee who commented on an earlier version of this paper.

9. Thanks to William P. Alston and an anonymous referee for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.