

The Necessity of God's Existence ¹

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The traditional thesis that God exists necessarily

I could as well not exist. Had I fallen from the cliff last year, I would not exist now. Furthermore, had my parents not met, or had God not created a universe, I would never have come into existence. At any rate, there are many ways the world could be without me, or even without anybody like me. It is, in this sense, possible that I do not exist. The same is true for the sparrow who wake me up this morning, the bread I had for breakfast, the sun, and the moon. All these things, like you and me, exist contingently.

God has traditionally been taken to be different in this respect. Whilst a world without me is a perfectly possible alternative to the actual world, a world without God is not a possible alternative to the actual world. God exists necessarily. Avicenna, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus, as well as many later authors, e.g. Leibniz, held this view in one or another form.² Anselm, for example, expressed this view by saying that God “cannot even be thought not to exist” and that God, of all things, “most truly” exists and, of all things, possesses existence “to the highest degree” (*Proslogion*, §3, p. 88). In his *Reply to Gaunilo* (§1, p. 112), explaining what he means by this, he says that “if this being [God] were to exist, it would not be capable of not-existing”. God, if he exists at all, exists necessarily (“ex necessitate”).³ Anselm explains at some length under which circumstances a thing “cannot be thought as not existing” (see *Reply to Gaunilo*, §1, p. 112f, and §4, p. 115). He points out that something which has parts “can possibly not exist” (§1, 113) because it can be broken up. His conclusion seems to be that something exists necessarily if, and only if, it exists at all times and if it does not consist of parts and is therefore imperishable.⁴

My task in this article is to explore what the claim that God exists necessarily should be taken to mean and whether, if God exists at all, it is true. I shall argue that it is true if it is interpreted with the right concept of necessity. I should point out that I am not concerned here with arguments for the existence of God. In particular, I am not concerned with ontological arguments for the existence of God. “God exists necessarily” is not supposed to mean that God’s existence is certain. Nor will I discuss here whether the necessity of God’s existence can play a role in an argument for the existence of God. Our question here is: *if there is a God*, does he exist in some sense necessarily? In other words, is theism best spelled out such that it entails the claim that God exists in some sense necessarily?

Logical positivism about necessity

When contemporary philosophers speak about necessity they usually mean “logical necessity”. It is worth remembering that this is a heritage of logical positivism. Let me give a rough summary of this story. At the heart of logical positivism there is a particular doctrine about necessity and about what was in those days called “the apriori”. Earlier philosophers as well as phenomenologists, for example Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler, believed that there are true claims – such as “Nothing can be green and red all over” or “Every tone has a pitch” – about what can and what cannot be, which tell us something “about the world” and its metaphysical structure. These claims were called apriori statements, or necessary statements (or “truths”). Logical positivists, like Moritz Schlick (see his 1930) or A. J. Ayer (see his 1936), took it that the truth of such statements would have to be known “independent of all experience”, and they believed that we can have knowledge of the world only through sense experience. They concluded that knowledge of necessary truths about the world would be an epistemological miracle. As they didn’t want to give up the idea that all knowledge about the world comes through sense experience and assumed that apriori truths are known independently of experience, they adopted the view that there are no apriori truths about the world. However, there are statements which they were willing to call apriori and necessary, namely *analytic* statements, i.e. statements like “Bachelors are unmarried”. So they proclaimed that all analytic statements are necessary, and that all necessary statements are analytic. “Necessity” used in this way is what came to be called “logical necessity”.

Today, seventy years later, this view about necessity is still the received view. Most contemporary philosophers mean by “necessity” logical necessity, and they take philosophical questions about whether *x* is possible – e.g. whether backward causation is possible – to be questions about whether *x* is logically possible. Sometimes a slightly wider concept is used, which is then called “broadly logical necessity” (cf. Plantinga 1974, 2), and, following Kripke and Putnam, many say that also statements like “Water is H₂O” are necessary. But the paradigm of a necessary statement is still “Bachelors are unmarried”.

The modern interpretation of “God exists necessarily”

It was natural for philosophers of religion in the last decades then to interpret the traditional claim that God exists necessarily as the claim that the statement “God exists” is *analytic*. However, as it was soon widely recognised, interpreted like this the traditional claim is quite implausible. Paradigm cases of analytic statements are statements like “Bachelors are unmarried”, and “God exists” does not resemble these paradigm cases in the relevant respect. A bachelor is defined as an unmarried man, in the sense that the word “bachelor”, in English, is used to say of something that it is an

unmarried man. Hence “Bachelors are unmarried” is an analytic statement according to Ayer’s definition of an analytic statement as one whose truth “depends solely on the definitions of the symbols it contains” (Ayer 1936, 73). Kant brought out the same point by saying that the concept of being unmarried is “contained” in the concept of a bachelor and that in analytic statements the predicate concept is already contained in the subject concept. If “God exists” were analytic, the word “God” would be used to say of something, amongst other things, that it exists. To say “God does not exist” would be, like “John is a married bachelor”, contradictory. However, to say that God does not exist may be false, but it is not contradictory. Furthermore, if “God exists” were analytic we could not use the term “God” for expressing the belief that there is no God. The reason for this is that in order to claim of something that it is F we need to refer to the thing with a description which does neither entail that the thing is F nor that it is not F. That is why we cannot make a claim about who in this room is married by saying “The bachelors in this room are unmarried”. But one *can* express the belief that there is no God by saying “God does not exist”. Hence “God exists” is not analytic.⁵

A theist who accepts the theory of necessity propagated by logical positivism will have to give up the traditional view that God exists necessarily. At least he has to hold that God’s existence is not necessary in the strongest sense, though he might want to say that it is necessary in some weaker sense. (E.g. Schrader 1991) However, I shall argue now that God – if he exists – exists necessarily in the strongest sense. God’s existence is necessary in the sense of *synthetic necessity*⁶. Synthetic necessity obtains where a statement of the form “Necessarily p” (or “It cannot be that so-and-so”) is true and neither it, nor p, is analytic. For example, “Nothing can be green and red all over” is presumably a case of synthetic necessity if the concept of being not red is not contained in the concept of being green. “Necessarily, bachelors are unmarried”, on the other hand, is not a case of synthetic necessity because it is analytic that bachelors are unmarried.⁷ “God exists necessarily” is a case of synthetic necessity if, given that God exists and that “God exists” is not analytic, it is true to say that God exists necessarily. In order to examine this we need to spell out some aspects of theism. In particular, we will have to consider what the reasons are for assuming that God exists everlastingly.

Theism

According to theism there is a person who is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.⁸ He has no cause, in the sense that nothing brought him into being or sustains him in being. He is cause of everything – at least everything temporal – in the sense that nothing comes into being and continues to exist unless God wills or, at least, allows it to do so. If there once was nothing besides God and then something came into being, then it was God who

brought this about. If, for example, the universe had a beginning and before there was only God, then it was God who brought the universe about and who has sustained it since then. It is possible that, at some time, there is a God and no universe, because God could abolish the universe or, given that he has no obligation to create a universe, he could have refrained from bringing it into existence. But it is impossible that at some time there is a universe but no God, because nothing can exist unless God sustains it. Everything is in this sense causally dependent upon God.

Theists usually believe that God is everlasting, that is, that he has always existed and will exist for ever.⁹ He has neither beginning nor end. One could simply stipulate that this is part of theism. One could stipulate, for example, that it is implied by “God exists” that God will exist for ever. However, that would not rule out that the one who created the universe, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, will cease to exist. It would just have the consequence that if he were to drop out of existence he would not fall under the concept of God anymore. Making it part of the concept of God that God exists for ever would make it in some sense true to say that “God (if he exists at all) exists for ever”, but not in an interesting one. The interesting question is not whether the creator of our universe if he were to drop out of existence would still fall under the concept of God; the interesting question is whether it could happen that the creator of our universe, who is omnipotent etc., drops out of existence. So let us ask whether there is a reason for assuming that God is everlasting.

Has God always existed?

First, consider the question whether God has always existed. If there was a time when God did not exist, then what happened at that time was not in his control. Whatever happened then, God was not able to prevent it from happening. This is quite clearly at odds with the idea of God being omnipotent. Further, if there was once no God, how should God have come into existence? Perhaps there can be uncaused events, but it is difficult to see how the coming into existence of a God could be an uncaused event. If, on the other hand, God’s coming into being was caused, then God would be dependent on this cause, and this is incompatible with his omnipotence. I conclude that, if there is a God, he has always existed.

Now consider the question whether it is possible that God will cease to exist. This question is to be divided into three questions. (A) Is it possible that God is destroyed? (B) Is it possible that God ceases to exist by accident, i.e. without cause? (C) Is it possible that God commits suicide? If these three questions are to be negated, then it is impossible that God will cease to exist.

On (A). God is powerful enough to prevent anything from abolishing him. Nothing is powerful enough to abolish God against his will. If God was

abolished in accordance with his will, that would amount to divine suicide, which we will discuss under (C).

On (B). God would only cease to exist by accident if he were to allow this to happen. This would, again, amount to divine suicide, which we will discuss under (C).

On (C). Is it possible that God will commit suicide, i.e. bring his existence to an end? An omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good person is a very great good indeed, whose death would be a great loss. God's death would also be the end of all created goods. Further, after God's death there would be no divine benefactions anymore and no relationships between God and other persons. If God were to cease to exist, these goods would be lost, and no good would be gained. We may assume that all this constitutes an overriding reason for God for not committing suicide. Given that it is impossible that God, being perfectly rational and omniscient, would do something which he has overriding reasons for not doing, we may assume that it is impossible that God would commit suicide.¹⁰ Given our discussion of (A), (B), and (C), we may conclude that it is impossible that God will cease to exist.

We have another argument for the thesis that God has no beginning and no end if we accept the claim that there cannot be a time at which there are no (real) things. This claim is plausible even if we assume, following Shoemaker (1969), that there can be time without change. If there is nothing, then there is also no time. Assume further that if God does not exist at a certain time, then at that time nothing exists. Nothing can exist unless God sustains it in being, and if at a time there is no God then he does not sustain anything in being at that time, hence at that time there is nothing. It follows from the premise that there cannot be a time at which there are no things that there is no such time. Hence – if he exists at all – God exists at all times. He has no beginning and no end.

Necessary existence

Now let us consider under which circumstances it is true to say of something that it exists necessarily. We can approach this question by asking first under which circumstances something does *not* exist necessarily. Surely something which did not exist at some time in the past does not exist necessarily. So a thing which has a beginning does not exist necessarily. Further, something which in the future might cease to exist does not exist necessarily. However, it doesn't follow from the fact that it is impossible that a certain thing will cease to exist that it exists necessarily. The reason for this is that something which did not exist at some time or which could have ceased to exist at some time does not exist necessarily, even if it is impossible that it will cease to exist. But if for something there is a time before which it has always existed (that is, if it has no beginning) and if it cannot cease to exist (i.e. if it is imperishable), then it exists necessarily. Something exists only *not* necessarily if there is a time at which it did not exist or if at some time it

is possible that it would cease to exist. I suggest that this is the most natural and the correct way of understanding a claim that a thing exists necessarily.

If the following four claims, which I have defended above, are true then God exists necessarily.

1. There is a time in the past before which God has always existed.
2. It is impossible that God is abolished.
3. It is impossible that God ceases to exist by accident, i.e. without cause.
4. It is impossible that God commits suicide.

It follows from (2), (3), and (4) that God is imperishable, that is, that it is impossible that he ceases to exist. This leaves the possibility that God once did not exist, which is excluded by (1). (1) states that God has no beginning, and then (2), (3), and (4) take over.

That God exists necessarily can also be derived from the following two claims.

- A. There cannot be a time at which nothing exists.
- B. If there is no God at time t then nothing exists at t .

(B) is derived from the claim that nothing can exist unless God sustains it. It follows from (A) and (B), as explained above, that it is impossible that God has a beginning or an end. That means that he has always existed and that he cannot cease to exist. Hence, if God exists at all, he exists necessarily.

What is necessity in the strongest sense?

It might be objected that necessity in this sense is not necessity in the strongest sense, because it is not “logical necessity”.¹¹ But I think it is not so clear that logical necessity is stronger than synthetic necessity. In fact, I have argued elsewhere (1999) that statements which are “logically necessary” are true solely in virtue of linguistic conventions and therefore don’t deserve to be called “necessary” at all. There would be a quick way of deciding which kind of necessity is stronger if something’s being necessary in the one sense entailed its being necessary in the other sense but not *vice versa*. But as no statement can be both logically and synthetically necessary, we can’t decide the matter this way.

The defender of logical necessity takes statements like “Bachelors are unmarried” as paradigms for necessity in the strongest sense. He will argue that God’s existence falls short of that kind of necessity and is therefore not necessary in the strongest sense. Isn’t God’s existing with “synthetic necessity” compatible with it being, as Alston puts it, “a gigantic cosmic accident” (Alston 1997, 43)? Isn’t it compatible with God not existing in all possible worlds? I reply that God’s existence being synthetically necessary

does rule out that it is a gigantic cosmic accident because the existence of a thing is only an accident if at some time it was possible that the thing would cease to exist (or if it was possible that the thing would not come into existence). I have argued that this is ruled out. What about the objection that existing with synthetic necessity falls short of existing in all possible worlds? Depends on what you mean by “possible worlds”. If you mean by possible worlds “logically possible worlds”, then you will say that God does not exist in all possible worlds. But this does not show that God’s existence is not necessary in the strongest sense.

Why should we think that the necessity for which “Bachelors are unmarried” is a paradigm is stronger, or deeper, or more fundamental than synthetic necessity? Doesn’t common sense suggest that the fact that bachelors are unmarried is merely a matter of language, or of linguistic convention? And if “God exists” were analytic, wouldn’t that merely reflect how we use the term “God”? I believe that logical positivism by teaching us to interpret philosophical questions about what can and what cannot be in terms of logical possibility and logical necessity put us on the wrong track. Of course, I cannot defend this general thesis here. But I have argued that it is a mistake to interpret the traditional claim that God exists necessarily in terms of logical necessity, and that once it is interpreted in terms of synthetic necessity it turns out to be true.

Notes

- ¹ This is an abridged version of my article “Die Notwendigkeit der Existenz Gottes”, *Metaphysica* 2 (2001), 55-81. I thank the editors of *Metaphysica* and the Verlag Röhl for the permission to reuse the material. I am grateful to the German Academic Exchange Service, DAAD, who made this work possible through a grant from the Gemeinsames Hochschulsonderprogramm III von Bund und Ländern.
- ² See Avicenna, *al-Risalat al-‘arshiya* (see Arberry 1951, 32); Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, §3, and *Reply to Gaunilo*, §1 and §4; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia, 2,3 (“Third Way”); Duns Scotus, *Tractatus de primo principio*, 34ff and 91; Leibniz, *On the Ultimate Origination of Things*.
- ³ Anselm’s claim that God cannot be thought not to exist (or that “he possesses existence to the highest degree”, or that “he exists necessarily”) is to be distinguished from his famous claim that saying that God is “something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought” implies that God exists because something which exists is thereby greater than something which does not exist. In the *Proslogion* each of these two claims serves as starting point for an argument for the existence of God. These two arguments can be taken to be two versions of the “ontological argument”. In the first argument (*Proslogion*, §2) Anselm claims that God’s existence follows from the fact that God is that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought because something which exists is

thereby greater than something which does not exist. In the second argument (*Proslogion*, §3) Anselm claims that God's existence follows from the fact that God is that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought because something which exists *necessarily* (i.e. which "cannot be thought not to exist") is thereby greater than something which possesses existence to a lesser degree; and that God exists necessarily entails that God exists.

- ⁴ "All those things (and they alone) that have a beginning or end or are made up of parts and [...] all those things that do not exist as a whole in a particular place or at a particular time can be thought as not existing." (*Reply to Gaunilo*, §3, p. 115)
- ⁵ For more arguments for the claim that "God exists" is not analytic see my (2001), and also Plantinga (1964, 216-219) and Swinburne (1993, 272-275). For a defense of the claim that God's existence is "logically necessary" see Adams (1971) and (1983). (See also Adams 1988, 27-31) However, in his (1983) he states that logically necessary truths need not be analytic. So he does not seem to contradict those who claim that "God exists" is not analytic. Adams uses a very wide concept of "logical necessity", which seems to include what I call logical necessity, which is equivalent to analyticity, as well as what I shall call synthetic necessity. He does not specify more precisely in which sense God exists necessarily.
- ⁶ I have developed and defended the concept of synthetic necessity in my (2000).
- ⁷ J. N. Findlay, in his famous article "Can God's Existence be Disproved?" (1948), argued as follows. God does not exist necessarily because "God exists" is not analytic. But if there were to be a God he would not "merely happen to exist" but he would exist necessarily, hence there is no God. G. E. Hughes (1955) replied that "God exists" is not analytic, but that God's existence is perhaps "synthetically necessary". This is the view which I am developing in this article. Terence Penelhum (1960), being sceptical about synthetic necessity, argued that "God exists necessarily" is true if "necessary" is interpreted as "indispensable". "A thing is necessary if it is indispensable." He called necessity in this sense "factual necessity" (Penelhum 1960, 185). John Hick (1961) endorsed this view. Kenny 1966 contains a helpful survey over the debate following Findlay's article.
- ⁸ For a detailed formulation of theism see Swinburne (1993) and Morris (1991).
- ⁹ I am assuming that God is not "outside" of time. For a defense of this view see Wolterstorff (1975) and Swinburne (1993).
- ¹⁰ This argument is to be found in St. Anselm's *Monologion*: "That which wills the demise of the supreme good [God] is no unalloyed good. [...] Therefore the supreme good does not come to an end of its own accord." (§ 18)
- ¹¹ D.E. Schrader, for example, thinks that if God's existence were logically necessary it would be necessary in the strongest sense, and that if it were necessary in another sense it would be necessary in a weaker sense. He says we need to look for "a notion of divine necessity a bit more modest than logical necessity". (Schrader 1991, 46)

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