# B is innocent

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### 1. Introduction

Stephanou (2000) presents an argument which, if sound, establishes that Aristotle necessarily exists. But Aristotle might not have existed, so the argument is unsound. Stephanou claims to identify where the argument goes wrong. He collars the principle (B) that possible necessities are truths. I argue below that he has got the wrong man and that his argument fails for a less interesting reason than the one which he suggests. §2 presents Stephanou's argument and his diagnosis of where it goes astray. §3 offers another diagnosis. §4 argues that Stephanou's diagnosis arises from an overreaction to some accurate observations and concludes the discussion.

### 2. Stephanou's argument and his diagnosis of its error

Consider the following argument (X):

(1) It is necessarily the case that if someone is Aristotle, he is the actual Aristotle.

(2) If Aristotle did not exist (and e.g. the *Metaphysics* is a medley of texts written by various authors at various times) then it is impossible that someone should be the actual Aristotle.

Hence, [(3)] if Aristotle did not exist, it is impossible that someone should be Aristotle. (Stephanou 2000: 188)

(X) is valid. (X)'s premises are also true. As Stephanou writes (2000: 189), '[i]t is impossible that someone should be Aristotle without being the actual Aristotle'; so (1) holds. And '[i]f Aristotle did not exist and the origins of our practice of using the name "Aristotle" lie, say, in a legend that developed in the 3rd century BC, then there is no such person as the actual Aristotle, and it is impossible that someone should be the actual Aristotle' (2000: 189). (2), therefore, also holds. So (3) holds. No worries: (3) does not imply that Aristotle has to exist.

Stephanou claims that (1) and (2) are not only true but necessarily so. (His reasons for that claim will be discussed in §4.) It follows, by the validity of (X), that (3) is also necessary. The following argument (Y) shows that if (3) is necessary and the principle (B) (that what is possibly necessary is true) holds, Aristotle exists necessarily:

(4) Necessarily, if Aristotle did not exist, it is impossible that someone should be Aristotle; that is, (3) is necessary.

So (by the principle that necessarily, if $p$ then $q$, only if possibly $p$ implies possibly $q$)

(5) Aristotle might not have existed only if it might have been impossible that someone should be Aristotle.

And so, by (B), (6) if Aristotle might not have existed, nobody is Aristotle.

But (7) someone is Aristotle.

So by (6) and (7), (8) necessarily, Aristotle exists.

Aristotle is not a necessary being. So (Y) must be unsound. (Y) relied upon only two dubitable claims, namely (4) and (B). Stephanou accepts (4) and accordingly concludes that (B) is false (2000: 192–93). He claims, that is, that possible necessities may fail to hold.

Stephanou's diagnosis of why (Y) is unsound is a radical one. If correct, it would show that the right logic for metaphysical possibility cannot extend **B**. One of the most popular candidates for that post, viz. **S5**, would immediately be disqualified from holding it. In the next section, I offer a different diagnosis of why (Y) is unsound.

## 3. Another diagnosis

Suppose that there is a possible circumstance $c$ in which Aristotle does not exist, but he might have. Then (3) is not necessary. Hence, by the validity of (X), one of (1) and (2) is not necessary. And it is easy to see that (1) and (2) cannot both hold in $c$.

I follow Stephanou in interpreting the necessitation of (1) as claiming that in any possible circumstance, necessarily, if someone were to be Aristotle, that person would have been the Aristotle of our original circumstance; and I follow him in construing the necessitation of (2) as claiming that, in any possible circumstance in which Aristotle does not exist, it is impossible for someone to be the Aristotle of that circumstance (see 2000: 191).

Suppose that (1) is necessary and so holds in $c$. Then in $c$, it is necessary that if someone is Aristotle, he is the Aristotle of $c$. Now, in $c$, Aristotle could have existed. So in $c$, it might have been that someone was the Aristotle of $c$. Hence (2) does not hold in $c$ and so is not necessary.

But are there possible circumstances in which Aristotle does not exist but he might have? Surely there are. For there are possible circumstances in which Aristotle does not exist but he would have, had some freak occurrence not occurred. (For instance, an accident might have rendered Aristotle's father impotent just before what would have been Aristotle's conception.) And in some of those possible circumstances, the relevant freak occurrence might not have occurred. (It was pure chance that Aristotle's mother dropped the knife …) But it follows that there are pos-

sible circumstances in which Aristotle does not exist but he might have (as necessarily, if ([if *p* were the case then *q* would be too] and possibly *p*), then possibly *q*).

(Notice that even those who reject (B) can therefore believe that there are possible circumstances in which Aristotle does not exist but he might have. For some such person could claim that Aristotle's existence might have been prevented by a freak occurrence, while also believing that (a) necessarily, Aristotle could exist only if some of his actual ancestors do, and (b) possibly, none of Aristotle's actual ancestors exist. This shows that the above argument that (1) and (2) are not both necessary does not illicitly assume (B).)

So (1) and (2) are not both necessary, and (3) certainly is not. (4), therefore, is false. We can thus block (Y) without objecting to principle (B). Stephanou offers reasons, however, for thinking that (1) and (2) are both necessary. As (X) is valid, those reasons translate immediately into ones for thinking that (4) holds. My diagnosis of why (Y) is unsound remains incomplete without some discussion of why Stephanou's reasons for believing (1) and (2) to be necessary are inadequate. The next section plugs that gap.

But *which* of (1) and (2) is not necessary? I shall follow Stephanou in equating 'the Aristotle of *c* is *F*' with 'some *x* is such that in *c* [*x* exists, and anything is Aristotle just in case it is also *x*, and *x* is *F*]' (see 2000: 190, n. 3). Given that interpretation, (2) is necessary while (1) is not, as we shall now see.

First, a useful result. Suppose that *c* is a possible circumstance and that, in *c*, *c′* is a possible circumstance. Make the – pretty trivial – assumption (a) that for any claim *p*, (in *c′*, *p* holds in *c*) just in case *p* holds in *c*. Then, perhaps unsurprisingly, if, in *c′*, the Aristotle of *c* is *F*, then, in *c*, something is Aristotle. Here is why.

Suppose that in *c′*, the Aristotle of *c* is *F*. Then, in *c′*, some *x* – call it *a* – is such that in *c* [*x* exists, and anything is Aristotle just in case it is also *x*, and *x* is *F*]. So (b) in *c* [*a* exists, and anything is Aristotle just in case it is also *a*, and *a* is *F*] (by (a)). Now, in *c*, *a* is *a* (as *c* is possible and *a* exists in *c*). So in *c*, Aristotle is *a* (by (b) and the fact that *c* is possible). But in *c*, *a* exists. Finally, we get that, in *c*, Aristotle exists (as *c* is possible, and so identicals are indiscernible in *c*).

Given the result just proved, it is easy to show that (1) is not necessary (I shall hereafter just assume (a) above). Consider some possible circumstance *c* in which Aristotle does not exist but he might have. Then in *c*, there is a possible circumstance *c′* in which some *x* – call it *a* – is Aristotle. In *c′*, is *a* equal to the Aristotle of *c*? No. In *c*, Aristotle does not exist. But then, by the argument of the previous paragraph, in *c′*, the Aristotle of *c* is not *a*. It immediately follows that (1) is not necessary.

To see that, by contrast, (2) is necessary, consider a possible circumstance $c$ in which Aristotle does not exist. Suppose that, in $c$, $c'$ is a possible circumstance. As Aristotle does not exist in $c$, by the useful result earlier established we straightaway get that in $c'$, nothing is the Aristotle of $c$. Generalizing, we get that, in $c$, necessarily, nothing is the Aristotle of $c$. Generalizing again, we get that (2) is necessary.

## 4. *Discussion of Stephanou's diagnosis*

Here are Stephanou's reasons for thinking that (1) is necessary:

> (1) is part of the logic of how proper names interact with modal operators. The proposition which it expresses ought therefore to be recognized as a logical truth, and as such it will very likely be a necessary truth too. Secondly, it seems clear that the proposition formulated in (1) is bound to be true by the concepts it involves, in whatever sense the proposition that no number is larger than itself, or an instance of the principle of non-contradiction, is bound to be true by (some of) the concepts it involves. If so, then the proposition formulated in (1) is presumably a necessary truth. (2000: 188–9)

He believes (1) to be necessary, that is, because it is some sort of logical or conceptual truth. His reasons for believing (2) to be necessary are similar. He writes:

> it seems clear that the proposition expressed in (2) is bound to be true by the concepts it involves; if so, then the proposition is presumably a necessary truth. (2000: 189)

In both of the above passages, Stephanou's inference to the necessity of the relevant claim is rather half-hearted; he writes that (1) 'will very likely be', and 'presumably' is, a necessary truth, and that (2) 'is presumably a necessary truth'. Why the caution?

The answer surely lies with putative contingent a priori truths. Consider the stock example, owed to Evans:

(9)  If somebody invented the zip, Julius did.

('Julius' is a name whose reference is fixed using the description 'the inventor of the zip'.) (9) is some sort of logical or conceptual truth. But, many would claim, (9) is contingent.

So Stephanou's argument for the necessity of (1) and (2) is threatened by plausible examples of logical or conceptual truths which are contingent. He is doubtless aware of this. In a footnote he writes:

> even if there are propositions that are logical, but not necessary, truths, and even if there are propositions which are somehow bound to be true by the concepts they involve, but which are not necessary truths,

we have no sufficient grounds for saying that [claims similar to a certain claim which, like (1) and (2), contains 'actual'] express such propositions. (2000: 192, n. 6)

No similar retort to the accusation that Stephanou's argument for the necessity of (1) and (2) fails can work, however. For, as §3 showed, (1) and (2) are not both necessary, which certainly gives us sufficient grounds for not inferring their necessity from the fact that they are logical or conceptual truths. Stephanou's inference to the necessity of (1) and (2) is an overreaction to their special logical or conceptual properties.

The upshot of this discussion is a happy one. It would be startling to find that one can regard Aristotle's existence as contingent only if one thinks that there are possible necessities which are untrue. Thankfully, however, we can remain unshaken. Stephanou's argument (Y) is indeed unsound, but not for the reasons which he gives.[1]

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*Reference*

Stephanou, Y. 2000. Necessary beings. *Analysis* 60: 188–93.