Symmetry's revenge

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Abstract. James Henry Collin recently developed a new symmetry breaker favouring the ontological argument's possibility premiss over that of the reverse ontological argument. The symmetry breaker amounts to an undercutting defeater for the reverse possibility premiss based on Kripkean cases of a posteriori necessity. I argue, however, that symmetry re-arises in two forms. First, I challenge the purported asymmetry in epistemic entitlements to the original and reverse possibility premisses. Second, relevantly similar Kripkean cases equally undercut the original possibility premiss.

1. The problem

Let a *perfect being* be a being possessing all perfections essentially, and suppose that necessary existence is a perfection. Now consider the following ontological argument (Collin 2022):

> (OA1) There is a possible world w_1, accessible from the actual world @, in which a perfect being exists.
> (OA2) So, a perfect being exists.

OA2 follows from OA1 together with the symmetry, transitivity, and reflexivity of the accessibility relation (as in system S5). Lest one think we have a swift and simple ontological argument on our hands, there's a problem. Consider the *reverse* ontological argument:

> (ROA1) There is a possible world w_1, accessible from the actual world @, in which a perfect being does not exist.
> (ROA2) So, a perfect being does not exist.

Much like OA2 and OA1, ROA2 follows from ROA1 in S5. Given the apparent epistemic parity or symmetry between OA1 and ROA1, and given their joint incompatibility, neither argument seems to make any headway in the dispute between theists and atheists. To make such headway, we need some reason that favours *exactly one* of OA1 or ROA1—we need, in other words, a *symmetry breaker*. Absent such, privileging one premiss over the other seems intolerably arbitrary.

Collin (2022) offers one such symmetry breaker favouring OA1 over ROA1. Although Collin's symmetry breaker is innovative, it is not ultimately convincing. In this article, I shall

explain why. I begin in §2 by articulating Collin's symmetry breaker. Then, in §3, I develop two criticisms thereof. I conclude in §4.

2. Collin's symmetry breaker

Plausibly, for person *q* who developed from sperm *m* and egg *n*, *q* essentially developed from *m* and *n* (Collin 2022: 412). Nevertheless, there are coherent descriptions of domains in which *q* does *not* develop from *m* and *n*. Such coherent descriptions pick out metaphysical impossibilities.

In cases like these, mere coherence of description fails to support the relevant possibility claims. One reason for this is that *other*, incompatible descriptions are likewise coherent. Returning to Collin's example, it is coherent to suppose *each* of <*q* is begotten of *m* and *n*> and <*q* is not begotten of *m* and *n*>. Nevertheless, given Kripkean essentiality of origins, <possibly, *q* is begotten of *m* and *n*> and <possibly, *q* is not begotten of *m* and *n*> cannot both be true. In such cases, argues Collin, we're only in a position to accept one of the possibility claims if we're *already* justified in accepting the corresponding *actuality* claim—warrant is only transmitted from actuality to possibility. The general lesson, according to Collin (2022: 413), is that we aren't justified in thinking $\Diamond p$ when (i) coherence fails to support $\Diamond p$, and (ii) a posteriori support for $\Diamond p$ is unavailable.[1]

With this lesson in hand, contends Collin, we can uncover an asymmetry between OA1 and ROA1. ROA1 entails *Not Essential Dependence* (NED), the claim that the actual physical things are not essentially dependent on a perfect being. But just as one cannot first warrantedly accept <possibly, *q* is not begotten of *m* and *n*> by dint of its coherence and thereby warrantedly infer <*q* is not begotten of *m* and *n*>, so too one cannot first warrantedly accept ROA1 and thereby warrantedly infer NED (Collin 2022: 413).

NED isn't supported a posteriori, since a true and (minimally) complete physical description of reality is silent on whether the actual physical things essentially depend on a perfect being. But nor does coherence support NED, for there are coherent descriptions of worlds that entail each of NED and ¬NED.

This is where asymmetry arises. Unlike ROA1, warrant for OA1 depends *neither* on prior warrant for NED *nor* on prior warrant for ¬NED. ROA1 *requires* the truth of NED, for it is incompatible with ¬NED. But OA1 requires *neither* NED *nor* ¬NED. Clearly ¬NED is compatible with OA1, for ¬NED amounts to the claim that the actual physical things *are* essentially dependent on a perfect being. But NED is similarly compatible with OA1. It could be

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[1] One problem for this general lesson is as follows. Even if both coherence and a posteriori considerations fail to support $\Diamond p$, we could easily be justified in thinking $\Diamond p$. This is because *there are other modal tools by which we can gain justification for possibility claims*, and such tools may very well distinctively support $\Diamond p$ as opposed to $\Diamond \neg p$ (or vice versa). Many extant symmetry breakers, for instance, appeal neither to coherence nor a posteriori considerations to support exactly one of OA1 or ROA1. Rasmussen (2018) appeals to a principle of modal uniformity or continuity; McIntosh (2021) appeals to modal seemings; Pruss (2001) appeals to perceptual criteria (which needn't be a posteriori, as in (e.g.) perceptual imaginings); and so on. If this is correct, then given that Collin's case (as evinced in Collin 2022: 414) rests on the general lesson, Collin's case fails. Alas, I shall set this problem aside and pursue other lines of criticism.

the case, for instance, that a perfect being exists *without* creating (or otherwise explaining) the actual physical things. Similarly, even if the actual physical things are essentially *independent*, 'this also does not exclude the possibility of a perfect Being. Maximal greatness,' after all, 'does not require being able to create that which is impossible to create' (Collin 2022: 414).

As Collin summarizes the asymmetry, 'entitlement to ROA1 is tethered to entitlement to NED,' and 'we lack entitlement to this latter claim' (Collin 2022: 415). By contrast, entitlement to OA1 is tethered *neither* to entitlement to NED *nor* entitlement to ¬NED. There is thus an undercutting defeater for ROA1 'but no similar undercutting defeater' for OA1 (Collin 2022: 415).

In the next section, I raise two objections to Collin's symmetry breaker. First, OA1 *is* tethered to ¬NED; and second, there *is* a similar undercutting defeater for OA1. It follows that Collin's proposed undercutting defeater fails to break symmetry between OA1 and ROA1.

3. Symmetry's revenge

3.1 OA1 requires ¬NED

For Collin, warranted acceptance of ROA1 requires warranted acceptance of NED because (i) ROA1 entails NED, and (ii) coherence considerations don't allow us to first accept ROA1 and transmit warrant to NED through known entailment (Collin 2022: 414). *But the same is true of OA1 with respect to ¬NED*. To see this, consider that—by the same token—warranted acceptance of OA1 requires warranted acceptance of ¬NED because (i) OA1 entails ¬NED, and (ii) coherence considerations don't allow us to first accept OA1 and transmit warrant to ¬NED through known entailment. The truth of (ii) is clear: while there are coherent descriptions of worlds in which a perfect being exists, there are also coherent descriptions of worlds in which no perfect being exists. But what about (i)? Why think that OA1 entails ¬NED?

The reasoning can be put as follows:

1. Suppose OA1 is true.
2. If OA1 is true, then it is necessary that there is a perfect being.
3. So, it is necessary that there is a perfect being. (1, 2)
4. A perfect being essentially possesses every perfection.
5. Being the source of every contingent (concrete) thing (if there are such) is a perfection.[2]
6. So, a perfect being is essentially the source of every contingent thing. (4, 5)
7. If (3) and (6) are true, then the actual physical things are essentially dependent on a perfect being—in which case, ¬NED is true.
8. So, ¬NED is true. (3, 6, 7)
9. So, if OA1 is true, then ¬NED is true. (1–8)

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[2] I will hereafter drop '(concrete)' and '(if there are such)' for simplicity, but they're implicit throughout.

The conclusion, (9), delivers (i).[3] The only premisses are (2), (4), (5), and (7). Collin grants (2), and it follows from S5 together with the definition of *perfect being* and the supposition that necessary existence is a perfection. (4) is true by definition, and (7) is clearly true—if a perfect being necessarily exists, and that being is essentially the source of every contingent thing, then there's no possible world in which the actual physical things (*qua* contingent) fail to depend on a perfect being—i.e., the actual physical things essentially depend on a perfect being.[4] The only remaining premiss is (5). Why think (5) is true?

For starters, one may find (5) intuitively plausible. Being that upon which every contingent thing depends just *seems* (to me, at least) to be a great-making feature. A being who graciously gives the gift of existence to everything contingent—indeed, a being without whom everything contingent would blip into nothingness—just seems better than a being from whom contingent things are independent. The latter being clearly lacks something *good* that the former being has—perhaps (the fullest expressions of) graciousness, or creativity, or providential control over which contingent things come to be, or a loving outpouring of itself to its creatures (for the contingent things *aren't even its creatures to begin with*).

But suppose you don't accept (5). No fret; we can still directly support (9) (and hence (i)). Consider: intuitively, *providentially controlling the character of contingent reality (if there is one)* is a perfection. This is quite plausible—such control facilitates artistic expression in the divine creative act; it affords more power and greater ability to shape the contingent world for the better; and so on. Yet a being *B* that isn't the source of every contingent thing would fail to have such providential control—if a contingent thing *C* isn't sourced in *B* (i.e., if *C* is *independent* of *B*) then *B* clearly exerts no control over whether *C* exists. So, since (a) providential control over contingent reality is a perfection, (b) a perfect being essentially has every perfection, and (c) such providential control entails being the source of every contingent thing, it follows that a perfect being would essentially be the source of every contingent thing. Thus, since physical things are contingent (cf. footnote 4), it follows that *if* there's a perfect being, every physical thing is essentially dependent thereon. And *that* delivers the truth of (9) (since—assuming necessary existence is a perfection—OA1 is logically equivalent (in S5) to <there's a perfect being>).

Below I address three objections.

Objection One. A referee objects that we shouldn't rely on intuitions about perfections and imperfections in this area, since—according to the referee—there are no objective facts about perfections and imperfections.

Reply. While the referee's view might circumvent my intuition-based justification for premiss (5), it does so at the cost of undermining Collin's defence of the modal ontological argument. This is because Collin's case for OA1 over ROA1 (and hence for OA2 over ROA2) relies on the claim that 'depending on something else for one's existence is an imperfection,' and

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[3] Technically, (9) only establishes *implication* rather than *entailment* (understood as necessary implication). But the premisses would be necessarily true if true at all, and so entailment follows straightforwardly.

[4] If one thinks (some) physical things *aren't* contingent, simply replace every instance of 'contingent' in this section with 'physical'—the force of my argument remains unaffected.

hence a perfect being would exist *a se* and necessarily (2022: 410). But the justification for thinking contingent, dependent existence is an imperfection relies on intuition. Thus, if the referee's view is correct, it will only save Collin's case from my criticism by undermining the case on another front.

Objection Two. Being the source of every contingent thing is *not* a perfection if NED is true, in which case the argument above fails to establish that OA1 entails ¬NED. For if NED is true, then it simply *couldn't* be the case that there's a necessarily existent perfect being that is essentially the source of every contingent thing. But it's no mark against a perfect being's *perfection* or *maximal greatness* that it doesn't have an impossible property. Impossible properties aren't even candidates for perfections.

Reply. First, I could equally argue as follows: impossible properties aren't candidates for perfections; but being the source of everything contingent *is* a perfection—after all, I gave principled, independent reasons for thinking this is true that don't rest on a prior denial of NED, and nothing in the objection at hand addresses such reasons; hence, being the source of everything contingent *is* possible after all. Hence, the objection fails.

A referee objects to my first reply as follows. My first reply suffers from the same objection it was meant to avert. For if 'everything contingent' quantifies over things that essentially lack a divine source, then we are regarding an impossible property as a perfection. And in that case, the objection has simply re-arisen. But if 'everything contingent' does *not* quantify over things that essentially lack a divine source, then my first reply fails to establish what I want it to establish.

But I disagree with the second horn of this dilemma. The quantifier in 'everything contingent' is intended to be unrestricted, and hence it ranges over *any* contingent thing. Now, I offered principled, independent reasons to think being the source of *everything* (unrestricted) contingent is a perfection, deriving from (a) its direct intuitiveness and (b) other, independent intuitions (e.g., intuitions that providential control over contingent reality is a perfection). These reasons have been challenged neither by Objection Two nor the reviewer's objection to my first reply.

But Objection Two simply points out that (i) if NED is true, then *being the source of everything contingent* is impossible, and (ii) impossible properties aren't perfections, from which it follows that (iii) if NED is true, *being the source of everything contingent* isn't a perfection. Notice that this simply doesn't engage the reasons I gave for thinking that being the source of everything contingent *is* a perfection. Given (a)-(b), we have reason to deny (iii)'s consequent and hence to deny its antecedent. In other words, we have reason to think that *precisely because* being the source of everything contingent *is* a perfection, NED is false. And since OA1 entails the existence of a being essentially possessing every perfection—*including* the perfection of being the source of everything contingent—it follows that OA1 entails ¬NED. And this, in turn, vindicates (9). To address my first reply to Objection Two, then, one either needs to positively

justify NED or else show why (a)-(b) are mistaken. But Objection Two accomplishes neither, and the same is true of the reviewer's objection to my first reply.[5,6]

Here's my second reply to Objection Two. Few will deny that a key tenet of traditional theism is that God is essentially the source of every contingent, physical thing (if there are such). As W. Matthews Grant explains, 'the traditional view maintains not just that everything distinct from God is, in fact, caused by God but that it is not possible that anything else exist without being caused by him' (2019: 3). Hence, the traditional theist is committed to the impossibility of a physical thing that is not essentially dependent on a perfect being. The traditional theist, in other words, is committed to ¬◊NED. Since ¬◊NED is equivalent to □¬NED, the traditional theist is committed to □¬NED. But the traditional theist is also committed to the necessary existence of a perfect being, and *a fortiori* the traditional theist is committed to the necessary *possibility* of a perfect being. Hence, the traditional theist is committed to □OA1. The traditional theist is therefore committed to (□OA1 & □¬NED). But (□OA1 & □¬NED) logically entails □(OA1 & ¬NED), and □(OA1 & ¬NED) logically entails □(OA1 → ¬NED). Hence, the traditional theist is committed to □(OA1 → ¬NED). Hence, the traditional theist is committed to the claim that OA1 entails ¬NED.

But then the traditional theist cannot accept a crucial step in Collin's symmetry breaker. For a crucial step in Collin's symmetry breaker, as explained in §2, is that entitlement to OA1 is *not* tethered to entitlement to ¬NED. But since (for the traditional theist) OA1 entails ¬NED, OA1 *requires* ¬NED to be true, and per Collin's reasoning in his symmetry breaker, it follows that entitlement to OA1 is thereby tethered to entitlement to ¬NED. So, for the traditional theist, entitlement to OA1 *is* tethered to entitlement to ¬NED. The traditional theist therefore cannot consistently accept Collin's symmetry breaker.

Thus, *even if* we grant that being the source of everything contingent is an impossible property (and hence isn't a perfection), the dialectical efficacy of Collin's symmetry breaker is considerably weakened, as the symmetry breaker is incompatible with the traditional theist's commitments.

Objection Three. A referee objects that, since NED concerns contingent things that are (*ex hypothesi*) *essentially* independent of a perfect being, the claim that <being the source of everything contingent is a perfection>—i.e., (5)—can be used to establish the incompatibility of NED with the existence of a perfect being *only if* perfection requires being the divine source of things which essentially have no divine source. But that's an inconsistent property.

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[5] Another way to think about my response to the reviewer's objection is that (a)-(b) *themselves* constitute reasons to think the quantifier in 'everything contingent' is *unrestricted* and so applies to *anything* contingent and hence *anything* physical. Thus, (a)-(b) *themselves* give us reason to think that a being possessing every perfection is incompatible with NED and hence give us reason to think that OA1 entails ¬NED.

[6] A referee objects that while one may find it intuitive that <if a perfect being exists, every contingent thing depends on that perfect being>, this intuition may not be *independent* of the intuition that <NED is false>. I have two replies. First, the intuitions do not need to be *independent* for my case to succeed. So long as one *has* the first intuition, my case for (9) will stand. Second, I doubt that the former intuition depends on the latter. I, at least, have the former intuition but *don't even have* the latter intuition.

Reply. I think this is mistaken. The reasoning in (1)-(9) shows that <OA1 and (5)>—together with background assumptions that all parties are granting—is incompatible with NED. Importantly, the derivation in (1)-(9) is made *without* the claim that perfection requires an inconsistent property (viz., the property of being the divine source of things which cannot have a divine source). In fact, the derivation in (1)-(9) is *incompatible* with the latter claim. For the derivation assumes OA1 in (1). Since OA1 entails the existence of a perfect being in S5, the derivation thereby assumes that a perfect being exists. From the existence of a perfect being, it follows that perfection is *actual*. But then perfection cannot require an inconsistent property, since nothing actual can require an inconsistent property. So, the derivation in (1)-(9) is *inconsistent with* the claim that <perfection requires being the divine source of things which essentially have no divine source.> Hence, *pace* Objection Three, it is *not* true that (5) can be used to establish the incompatibility of NED with the existence of a perfect being only if perfection requires being the divine source of things which essentially have no divine source.

What we learn from all the preceding is that Collin *hasn't*, after all, broken symmetry between OA1 and ROA1. Just as ROA1 is tethered to NED, OA1 is tethered to ¬NED. Symmetry's revenge is exacted.

3.2 Symmetric undercutting defeaters

But symmetry's vengeance isn't quite quenched. For there *is* a similar undercutting defeater uniquely afflicting OA1. Consider a claim analogous to NED:

(NED*) The actual physical things are not essentially dependent on a uniquely necessary imperfect being.

Where

x is a uniquely necessary imperfect being $=_{def}$ x is the only necessarily existent concrete object, and x is not a perfect being

As in the case of ◊NED and ◊¬NED, ◊NED* and ◊¬NED* are incompatible. But, crucially, there are coherent descriptions both of worlds in which NED* is true and worlds in which ¬NED* is true. Here's a coherent description in which ¬NED* is true: the world is much like the actual world—suppose it's populated by the same denizens of physical reality—*and* there's a non-physical, non-spatiotemporal, uniquely necessary imperfect being upon which every actual physical thing essentially depends.[7] Likewise, here's a coherent description in which NED* is true: the world is much like the actual world—suppose it's populated by the same denizens of physical reality—*and* there are *two* non-physical, non-spatiotemporal, necessary imperfect

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[7] Perhaps this being is an imperfect, angel-like immaterial mind. Perhaps it's an impersonal ultimate reality, such as some interpretations of the Neo-Platonic One, Brahman, and the Tau.

beings upon whose joint activity every actual physical thing essentially depends. Suppose, further, that these are the only two necessary beings in the world.

Importantly, though, OA1 entails NED*, whereas ROA1 is entirely compatible with each of NED* and ¬NED*. For OA1 entails (in S5) that there is a necessarily existent perfect being, and hence OA1 entails that it is impossible for there to be a uniquely necessary imperfect being. But if the actual physical things *were* essentially dependent on a uniquely necessary imperfect being, then there *would* be a uniquely necessary imperfect being. Hence, OA1 entails that the actual physical things are *not* essentially dependent on a uniquely necessary imperfect being. OA1 therefore entails NED*. But, clearly, each of NED* and ¬NED* is compatible with ROA1. In fact, the coherent scenarios described in the previous paragraph—in one of which NED* is true, in the other of which ¬NED* is true—are scenarios *incompatible* with the existence of a necessary perfect being.

Equally clearly, we cannot gain epistemic entitlement to NED* through a posteriori means. Nothing in a true and complete description of physical reality, for instance, rules out the existence of a non-physical, non-spatiotemporal, uniquely necessary imperfect being upon which every actual physical thing essentially depends. For instance, nothing about the shapes, velocities, positions, masses, charges, mean molecular kinetic energies, etc. of actual physical things rules out a uniquely necessary imperfect angel-like mind that serves as the foundational ground upon which such physical things depend.

Thus, NED*, like NED, is in the same epistemic position as <q is not begotten of m and n>. We cannot gain entitlement to NED* through considerations of coherence. But nor can we gain a posteriori entitlement thereto. And since OA1 requires NED* but ROA1 requires neither NED* nor ¬NED*, we can conclude—by reasoning entirely parallel to Collin's—that (a) entitlement to OA1 depends on prior entitlement to NED*, and this is entitlement we simply lack, while (b) entitlement to ROA1 is compatible with agnosticism about NED*. There is thus an undercutting defeater uniquely afflicting OA1 that's entirely parallel to that allegedly afflicting ROA1. Symmetry's revenge is exacted once more.[8]

4. Conclusion

Collin offers a refreshing, innovative symmetry breaker for OA1 over ROA1. Ultimately, however, I think symmetry simply re-arises. To show this, I raised two objections. First, *pace* Collin, OA1 requires ¬NED. Second, a parallel undercutting defeater uniquely afflicts OA1. Collin's article advances the ontological argument debate into new terrain. In symmetric fashion, I hope mine does too.[9]

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[8] By including 'uniquely' in NED*, I have not *presupposed* ROA1, any more than by adding 'perfect being' to ¬NED, Collin presupposes OA1. Instead, I simply ensure the *conditional* claim that *if* NED* is true, *then* there's no perfect being. This claim does not presuppose ROA1.

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