

A New and Improved Argument for a Necessary Being*

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Joshua Rasmussen has recently offered an intriguing new argument, the Modal Argument from Beginnings, for the conclusion that a causally powerful necessary being exists.¹ Rasmussen draws this momentous conclusion from the seemingly innocuous claim that it is possibly true that the first contingent concrete particular ('CCP') to exist was caused to exist. Here I suggest two improvements to the argument.

Boiled down to its bare essentials, and abstracting away from details that won't figure into my evaluation, Rasmussen's argument can be understood as follows.

Simplified Modal Argument from Beginnings

1. It is possible that the first CCP is caused to exist. (Premise)²
2. In the possible case where the first CCP is caused to exist, a causally powerful necessary being must cause it to exist.

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¹ The literal statement of Rasmussen's conclusion is that 'there is a necessary being'. But by 'a necessary being' Rasmussen means 'a necessarily existing, causally powerful being', as he makes clear in both the abstract and introduction of his paper.

² Note: the argument is not committed to *the first CCP in the actual world* being caused.

(Premise)

3. So a causally powerful necessary being possibly exists. (From 1–2)
4. So a causally powerful necessary being necessarily exists. (From 3)

I will raise two objections to the argument as understood here. First I will question whether line 2 is true. But this objection is not fatal, because the argument can be recast so as to avoid it. Second I will question whether it is valid, at least when the conclusion is understood in the most natural way.

Let's begin with line 2 of the argument. Why think that it's true? Rasmussen reasons along the following lines. Suppose that the first CCP is caused to exist. In that case, something other than a CCP causes the first CCP, on pain of circularity. So a necessary being must cause the first CCP. This entails that a necessary being possibly exists, which in turn entails that a necessary being necessarily exists.³

I am suspicious of this reasoning offered in support of line 2. Grant that it is impossible for a CCP to cause the first CCP. From this it doesn't follow that a necessary being caused the first CCP. All that follows is that a non-CCP caused the first CCP. That is, all that follows is that the cause must be *either* necessary (the opposite of contingent), *or* abstract (the opposite of concrete), *or* universal (the opposite of particular). We're given no reason to prefer the first of

³ Compare Rasmussen's remarks in defense of line 6 of his original version of the argument.

these to the latter two. For instance, perhaps a causally efficacious contingent *abstract* particular (a “trope”) caused the first contingent concrete particular.

Be that as it may, Rasmussen’s argument could be reformulated to meet this challenge as follows, where ‘thing’ is understood broadly to include all concrete, abstract, particular and universal entities.

Modified Simplified Modal Argument from Beginnings

- 1'. It is possible that the first contingent thing is caused to exist. (Premise)
- 2'. In the possible case where the first contingent thing is caused to exist, a causally powerful necessary being must cause it to exist. (Premise)
3. So a causally powerful necessary being possibly exists. (From 1' and 2')
4. So a causally powerful necessary being necessarily exists. (From 3)

This argument avoids the problems associated with line 2 of the previous argument, but still provides an equally good reason to accept the conclusion.

Now let’s turn to whether the argument is valid. (The following points apply equally well to both the simplified and modified simplified versions.) I contend that it is invalid. Line 4 doesn’t follow from line 3. Strictly speaking, all that follows from line 3 is

- 4'. A *possibly* causally powerful necessary being necessarily exists.

The difference between lines 4 and 4' is important.⁴ Line 4 entails that there exists some necessary being *that is causally powerful in every possible world*. Line 4' entails no such thing; rather, it entails only that there exists some necessary being that is causally powerful in *some* possible world.

The argument of course doesn't purport to establish that God exists. But part of its interest surely comes from the fact that it might lend support to theism. It might be thought to lend support to theism because if God does exist, then God necessarily exists and is necessarily causally powerful. So the truth of 4 would give theism a boost whereas 4' would not.⁵ Of course, the limitations of conscripting either 4 or 4' into the service of theism will be familiar from the history of cosmological arguments. For even if they were true, it doesn't follow that the necessary being is good, or that it has great powers, or that it is the unique such being (but see [Rasmussen 2009]). Yet despite these limitations in relation to theism, the existence of a possibly causally powerful necessary being would nonetheless still be an interesting discovery, so the argument

⁴ Rasmussen's discussion contains hints of both 4 and 4'. His abstract says, 'I present a new argument for the thesis that there is a necessarily existing, causally powerful entity — a *necessary being*,' whereas his introduction says, 'I will offer a new argument for the age-old thesis that there is at least one *necessary being*, i.e. a necessarily existing entity capable of causal activity.' The abstract's formulation corresponds to 4, the introduction's to 4'. Rasmussen indicates (personal communication) that he prefers reading 4'.

⁵ Or even if it did, it wouldn't do so nearly as much as 4 would.

deserves careful consideration.^{6,7}

⁶ An anonymous referee suggests a promising alternative way of developing the modal argument from beginnings, which goes as follows. The causal powers of a contingently powerful necessary being would themselves be contingent. And the existence of these contingent powers presumably could be explained causally. But, on pain of circularity, this explanation couldn't be in terms of contingent causal powers. So it starts to look like we need to posit a necessarily powerful necessary being after all, not just a possibly powerful necessary being. More carefully spelled out, the argument might start like this:

1. It is possible that the first contingent causal power is caused to exist. (Premise)
2. In the possible case where the first contingent causal power is caused to exist, a necessary causal power must cause it to exist. (Premise)
3. So a necessary causal power exists. (From 1 and 2)

It would take further work to get from 3 to the existence of necessarily powerful necessary substance. But 3 is itself a striking enough conclusion.

⁷ For helpful discussion and feedback, I thank two anonymous referees, Stewart Candlish, Joshua Rasmussen, and especially Angelo Turri.

References

Rasmussen, Joshua 2009. From a Necessary Being to God. *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 66/1: 1–13.

Rasmussen, Joshua forthcoming. A New Argument for a Necessary Being. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.