Necessitarianism Under Fire

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Kudos to Amy Karofsky for producing a book[1] that boldly advocates necessitarianism, a position that hasn't seen much good press over the years. Say what you will about it, necessitarianism has deep implications! While her book left me unconvinced, I certainly benefited from working through it. I will be offering criticisms of Dr. Karofsky's arguments for necessitarianism, but I'm happy to start by noting four important points on which we agree.

First, I agree with her that trying to explain the existence of contingency by invoking the libertarian free choice of God is hopeless: it is the attempt to explain the mildly controversial by invoking the totally mysterious. Second, I share her dim view of the careless way in which counterfactual conditionals get bandied about in ordinary language. Indeed, I regard most of the everyday counterfactual conditionals that people assert as, almost certainly, either false or only trivially true. Entertaining counterfactual conditionals requires rewriting the history of the universe, and we can't stop the rewriting just when we find it convenient to. Third, I agree with Dr. Karofsky that many everyday counterfactual conditionals are best seen as functioning to assert claims that aren't conditionals at all. Fourth, I agree with her that the question of which properties are essential to an object and which are merely accidental to it is harder than many philosophers take it to be.

Turning now to points where we disagree. Unlike the few other necessitarians that I can name, Dr. Karofsky doesn't base her necessitarianism on a commitment to the Principle of Sufficient Reason (6), which is a principle that I myself accept. Instead, she argues that the rival position, contingentarianism, bears a burden of proof that it fails to overcome, a burden of proof

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[1] *A Case for Necessitarianism*, Routledge, 2022. All parenthetical page-references are to this work.

that she says necessitarianism avoids. In my comments, I will argue for four conclusions. First, the burden of proof she identifies falls equally on contingentarianism and necessitarianism, so it gives us no reason to prefer one position over the other. Second, necessitarianism has the fatal defect of classifying as logically valid some inferences that are clearly invalid. Third, necessitarianism faces an insurmountable burden of proof if Dr. Karofsky is right that it implies extreme monism. Fourth, and contrary to widespread philosophical opinion, we can satisfy every rational demand, including the Principle of Sufficient Reason, while steering clear of necessitarianism and its fatal flaws.

1. Necessitarianism has modal implications

In order to stick contingentarians with the burden of proof, Dr. Karofsky argues that contingentarianism comes with *modal implications* whereas necessitarianism avoids them:

> [T]he necessity of a necessary entity just consists in its being the way that it actually is. Thus, an explanation of the entity's being as it is will be an account of its necessity. While necessity is not a fugitive fact, contingency is because a contingent entity is not only as it is, it is *also* such that it could have been otherwise in some way. [3, italics in original]

The modal implication is that the contingent entity could have been otherwise in some way. Indeed, not only could any contingent entity have *been otherwise* in some way; any contingent entity could have failed to *be* entirely.[2]

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[2] Dr. Karofsky seems to agree that any contingent entity could have failed to be. She writes that 'a metaphysical explanation of contingency describes: that *in virtue of which* a contingent entity *could have failed to have existed* (*obtained, held, happened*, etc.)' (49, italics in original).

Because she says that modal implications flow from contingency but not from necessity, Dr. Karofsky concludes that contingency demands *explanation* in a way that necessity doesn't. That conclusion is the second premise of what she calls 'the main argument' (91) for necessitarianism. According to the main argument, because the contingentarian can't satisfy this explanatory demand and the necessitarian doesn't *need* to, the necessitarian wins by default. Indeed, a recurring claim in the book is that 'when any and all contingentarian and necessitarian assumptions are set aside…we find that things *are the way they are*, period' (105), to which she says the contingentarian alone then adds an indefensible modal rider.

The passage I quoted above is crucial to Dr. Karofsky's main argument, so I want to focus on the two claims it contains. First, Dr. Karofsky is clearly right that 'an explanation of [any necessary] entity's being as it is will be an account of its necessity.' That's because the phrase 'being as it is' covers *all* the facts about the entity, including its necessity. But by the same token, an explanation of any contingent entity's 'being as it is' will include an account of that entity's contingency, because its contingency is among the facts about it. So Dr. Karofsky's claim fails to show that necessity beats contingency in this respect. On the contrary, it's just a truism that *every* entity, whether necessary or contingent, is as it is – and *not* also some other way. This truism does nothing to support necessitarianism over its rival.

Second, Dr. Karofsky claims that describing an entity as 'contingent' carries a modal implication, namely, that the entity 'could have been otherwise in some way', whereas describing an entity as 'necessary' carries no modal implication. But that claim is false. Describing an entity as 'necessary' implies that the entity *couldn't* have failed to exist, or – in affirmative language – that the entity exists in all possible worlds. Otherwise, necessitarians wouldn't *disagree* with contingentarians when contingentarians say that some entities *could* have

failed to exist. If you deny the contingentarian claim that I could have failed to exist, then you're logically committed to affirming that I *couldn't* have failed to exist. Thus, contingentarians and necessitarians are both committed to affirmative modal claims. Discomfort about affirmative modal claims is therefore no reason to favor one of those positions over the other.

2. Contingency and logical implication

According to necessitarianism, nothing is merely contingently true or contingently false. All truths are necessarily true, and all falsehoods are necessarily false (134). I see this as a fatal defect of necessitarianism, because we must distinguish between necessary truth-values and contingent truth-values in order to understand why *logical implication* holds in some cases but not others. Consider these two propositions, each of which is true:

J: Joe Biden was the U.S. president during 2022.

S: Something was the U.S. president during 2022.

As basic logic tells us, J *logically implies* S, but the converse doesn't hold: S doesn't logically imply J. The standard way of explaining the difference is that it is logically impossible for J to be true and S false, whereas it is logically possible for S to be true and J false. In other words, the conjunction $(J \land \neg S)$ is necessarily false, while the conjunction $(S \land \neg J)$ is only contingently false. However, according to necessitarianism, each of J and S, being true, is necessarily true, in which case *both* of the conjunctions I just referred to are necessarily false – meaning that J and S logically imply each other. That result makes a mockery of logical implication.

Necessitarians might try to explain why J logically implies S, but not conversely, without implicitly relying on the distinction between necessity and contingency. I'll consider three ways

they might try, and I'll argue that none of them work. First, appealing to *predicate logic*, they might point out that the rules of predicate logic validate the inference from J to S but not the inference from S to J. True, but so what? The only reason to care that the rules of predicate logic validate one inference but not the other is that the rules *get it right* about the modal facts: namely, that the conjunction $(J \land \neg S)$ is necessarily false, while the conjunction $(S \land \neg J)$ is only contingently false. Otherwise, the predicate logic derivation of S from J is just a stack of formulas.

Second, necessitarians might appeal to *formal models* and point out that any model verifying J verifies S, whereas at least one model verifying S falsifies J. But why does a model that falsifies J matter? After all, it's a *false* model, because J is true. A falsifying model matters only if, despite being actually false, it *could have been* true, which is a combination that necessitarians can't allow.

Third, necessitarians might point out that S is *conceptually contained* in J whereas J is not conceptually contained in S. But how do conceptual containment and its absence explain why J implies S but not conversely? Conceptual containment explains why J implies S only if conceptual containment makes the conjunction $(J \land \neg S)$ necessarily false, a result that necessitarians can of course accept. But by the same token, the *absence* of conceptual containment explains why S fails to imply J only if its absence makes the false conjunction $(S \land \neg J)$ *not* necessarily false, which necessitarians can't accept. In sum: Whichever way you explain why J logically implies S, but not conversely, I suspect you'll eventually need to distinguish truth-values that obtain necessarily from truth-values that obtain only contingently. Necessitarianism can't accommodate that distinction.

3. Extreme monism

I believe that the contingent facts include the fact that I exist. I think that the necessary facts include the fact that $1 = 1$. Dr. Karofsky thinks that both of those facts hold as a matter of absolute necessity. But I can imagine a situation in which I don't exist – for instance, a situation in which life never arises in the universe – whereas I can't imagine a situation in which 1 doesn't equal 1. Dr. Karofsky thinks that this difference in what I can imagine justifies nothing (26, 40), and I don't put much stock in it either. How, then, can we settle the dispute between contingentarians and necessitarians? If Dr. Karofsky is right about what necessitarianism *implies*, then I think we can settle the dispute in favor of her opponents.

Dr. Karofsky writes that 'like Parmenides and Spinoza, I arrive at the conclusion that the universe in monistic' (7) and 'it does seem to me that necessitarianism is committed to monism' (144). She unpacks her monistic view as 'the fact that there can be no individuation of objects, properties, concepts, facts, or anything else that is purported to be a distinct individual that is other than the universe itself' (144). Monism comes in different versions but none more extreme than that, so I'll label her view 'extreme monism'. According to extreme monism, I'm identical to the universe itself, and so is the Eiffel Tower; thus, by the transitivity of identity, I'm identical to the Eiffel Tower. But no one believes that. Or if someone *does* believe it, I don't, which is a difference between us and hence, by Leibniz's Law, that person and I are distinct, contrary to extreme monism. Indeed, my belief that I'm not the Eiffel Tower is a perfect example of a *Moorean certainty*, named after G. E. Moore. A Moorean certainty is a proposition that will always be more credible than the least credible premise in any philosophical argument against it. If Dr. Karofsky is right that necessitarianism implies extreme monism, then you can accept necessitarianism only if you deny a Moorean certainty – only if you can bring yourself to believe

that you are the Eiffel Tower. That's the price. Granted, extreme monism is a *simple* ontology, but it achieves its simplicity only by asserting identities that no sane person accepts.

Drawing a further monistic consequence from necessitarianism, Dr. Karofsky says this: 'I believe that there is just one true proposition that is the statement of the entire universe that is the combination of all the statements that are true' (144). In 1984, Patrick Grim, a philosopher at SUNY Stony Brook, refuted this view.[3] When she says 'a combination of all the statements that are true', I presume that Dr. Karofsky intends a *set* or a *conjunction* of those statements; there's no other thing I can imagine she could intend by that phrase. As for a *set* of those statements, Grim offered the following proof by *reductio* that no such set can exist. Suppose that there is a set of all the true statements, whether it contains only one true statement or more than one. For each of the subsets of that set, there is a true statement as to whether some particular true statement from the original set belongs to that particular subset. By Cantor's power set theorem, any set, finite or not, gives rise to more subsets than there are elements in the set. Therefore, more true statements will exist than there are elements in the set of *all* the true statements, which is of course impossible. So no such set can exist. A similar but longer proof shows that there can't possibly exist a *conjunction* of all the true statements there are.[4] So it's provable that there's no such thing as 'a combination of all the statements that are true'. If extreme monism says otherwise, then extreme monism is untenable.

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[3] 'There Is No Set of All Truths', *Analysis* 44:4 (1984), 206–208.

[4] In *Determinism, Death, and Meaning* (Routledge 2022, 98–99), I prove this result concerning a conjunction of all the *contingently* true statements there are. It is a trivial task to expand that result to cover a conjunction of all the true statements *simpliciter* that there are.

4. Contingencies all the way down

Fortunately there's an alternative view that avoids the problems I've identified. This view rejects necessitarianism while allowing that infinitely many things exist necessarily. The laws of logic, for instance, are among the things that exist necessarily, and I am among the things that exist only contingently. Dr. Karofsky argues that such a mixed ontology of necessary things and contingent things can't work:

> Thus, if anything in the world is contingent, everything else in the world is related to that contingency by being in the world with it, and consequently, everything is contingent. [100]

But that argument fails to show that necessary things and contingent things can't coexist. There is indeed a sense in which 'everything is contingent', but it is perfectly consistent with the fact that some things *exist* necessarily. Even necessarily existing things possess some of their *properties* only contingently. The Law of Noncontradiction exists necessarily, and the proposition that $1 = 1$ is necessarily true, but both of them only contingently possess the property of being referred to by me in this sentence. Thus, Dr. Karofsky's argument slides illicitly from something's possessing some of its properties only contingently to its *existing* or *being true* only contingently.

The contingentarian view I'm recommending accepts the Principle of Sufficient Reason, which is all to the good, because unless that principle is true our world contains unintelligible magic. The Principle of Sufficient Reason implies that, for each thing, there is a logically sufficient explanation for its existence and for its having whichever features it has. These explanations, because they're logically sufficient, logically imply whatever they explain.

Therefore, it must be the case that the logically sufficient explanation for the existence of any contingent thing is *itself* only contingently true rather than necessarily true. Otherwise, the necessary truth of the *explanans* (the thing doing the explaining) would transmit to the *explanandum* (the thing being explained), making the contingent thing's existence necessary rather than contingent. Consequently, this view implies the existence of an *infinite regress* of explanations each member of which is contingently true and the whole of which is contingently true.

In her book, Dr. Karofsky calls this view 'contingencies all the way down' (59), and she rejects it. She offers three objections to it. In my view, none of them succeed. First, she argues that

> such an infinite series of contingencies would result in an overabundance of contingencies; if for every contingency there is another contingency and another and another and so on, the contingentarian ontology becomes impossibly plentiful and the theory would fail to comply with [the] condition that *the set of members of a reductive base is exhaustive*. [60, italics in original]

I would invite Dr. Karofsky to explain what she means by 'impossibly plentiful'. I presume that she doesn't regard *every* infinite series as impossibly plentiful: the series of the positive integers isn't impossibly plentiful just because it's infinite. As for being 'exhaustive', a set is exhaustive if it contains everything that it ought to contain. As far as I can tell, Dr. Karofsky's argument in the quoted passage is that something about an infinite regress *as such* prevents it from containing everything that it ought to contain. But why? The regress of the positive integers is infinite yet exhaustive in that it contains all the positive integers and leaves none of them out. Indeed, the regress exhausts the positive integers only *because* it is infinite.

Dr. Karofsky offers a second reason why no infinite regress of contingencies can be exhaustive. Any regress containing only contingent explanations is at best only *contingently* exhaustive. Moreover, she says, if the regress satisfies the condition of exhaustiveness only contingently, then 'the condition could fail to hold, and there will be nothing to prevent other objects from being allowed…into' the regress (51). True, but so what? As long as the regress *is* exhaustive it's exhaustive; it passes that test. It doesn't matter that the regress *could have failed to be* exhaustive. The whole point of contingentarianism is that 'is' and 'could have failed to be' are compatible. Therefore, it just begs the question against contingentarianism to presume that they aren't compatible.

Dr. Karofsky's third objection to contingencies all the way down is that in an infinite regress of contingent entities

> there will always be another [contingent entity] *C* for which [the] question ['How do we know that *C* is contingent?'] arises, and another, and another, *ad infinitum*. It follows that there is insufficient evidence that any particular *C* is contingent, and it must be conceded that it is possible that at least some *C* is *not* contingent and possible that some *C* is necessary. But if any *C* is possibly necessary, then that *C* is necessary and not contingent. [61, italics in original]

This third argument fails in two ways. First, it conflates the ontological question of how things *are* with the epistemological question of what we *know* about them. Note the phrase 'insufficient evidence'. What insufficient evidence can do is deprive us of knowledge. Insufficient evidence can't prevent an entity from *being contingent*, even if it prevents us from knowing that the entity is contingent. Insufficient evidence that some entity is contingent implies only the *epistemic* possibility that the entity is not contingent, i.e., that the entity is noncontingent *for all we know*.

The epistemic sense of 'possible' is the only sense in which insufficient evidence would force us to concede 'that it is possible that at least some *C* is *not* contingent', as Dr. Karofsky puts it. But epistemic possibility is irrelevant to the *metaphysical* possibility of the view under discussion – that is, the metaphysically possible *truth* of the view. To the contingentarian claim that an infinite regress of contingent entities is metaphysically possible, it is irrelevant to reply, 'But how do you know that any particular member of the regress *is* contingent?'

Second, and more important, the final sentence of Dr. Karofsky's argument takes a plausible principle of modal logic and misapplies it. The plausible principle is the theorem of S5 modal logic 'If possibly necessarily *p*, then necessarily *p*.' This theorem is plausible for metaphysical modality but totally implausible for epistemic modality. Read epistemically, the theorem says this: 'If, for all we know, we know that *p*, then we know that *p*' or, equivalently, 'If we don't know that we don't know that *p*, then we know that *p*.' On *that* reading, the theorem utterly fails: ignorance of our ignorance does not give us knowledge. But again, it is only the epistemic reading of 'possible' on which the insufficiency of evidence is relevant. So Dr. Karofsky's argument fails in this second respect as well.

Later in her book, Dr. Karofsky asserts the stunning claim that 'unactualized possibility is contradictory' (98), and she gives the following argument for it:

> Therefore, any description of what is not-actual will involve a contradiction and thus expresses an *impossibility*. Indeed, as *contra-actual*, any such description will contradict a description of what is actual. Because what is actual is clearly possible, what is contra-actual is contra-possible. [99, italics in original]

If that argument worked, it would be 'game over' for contingentarians. Now, everyone should accept the second sentence in the quotation: any complete description of nonactual conditions

will contradict any complete description of the actual conditions. However, that fact doesn't make the nonactual conditions *internally* contradictory. A world can differ from the actual world, even in infinitely many ways, without harboring an internal inconsistency. But perhaps deviations from the actual are impossible for a different reason. The inference to *that* conclusion occurs in the last sentence. The first half of the sentence is the premise that 'what is actual is clearly possible'. If that premise asserts an *equivalence* between 'actual' and 'possible', then Dr. Karofsky's argument begs the question, because contingentarians of course *deny* any equivalence between 'actual' and 'possible'. What all sides accept is the *implication from* 'actual' *to* 'possible'. However, if the premise asserts only an implication, then Dr. Karofsky's argument commits the fallacy of denying the antecedent. So either her argument is invalid, or it's question-begging.

On the view I'm recommending, there are indeed contingencies all the way down. Contingent and noncontingent things exist, and the ancestry of any contingent thing is a chain of infinitely many earlier contingent states of reality. Each link in that chain necessitates every later link, and a logically sufficient explanation for any link resides in arbitrarily nearby earlier links. Any link in the chain could have been otherwise provided that infinitely many earlier links had been otherwise, which they could have been.

What's not to like about this worldview? Well, you might object that an infinite regress of contingently true explanations must leave at least one well-posed question unanswered. That is, you might object that such a regress may explain each of its members in terms of earlier members, but it can't explain why the whole regress contains the particular members it does rather than other members or no members at all. In Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), the character Demea raises this objection. I answer the objection in some

articles and in my book, and I can go into that during the Q&A if appropriate. In short, the regress needn't leave any well-posed question unanswered. The contingentarian regress contains instances of infinitely many kinds, and explanations will exist for every instance and for every kind. Every stage in the regress is necessitated *by* earlier stages, but no stage is necessary *simpliciter*.

Alternatively, you might object that no item in the infinite regress really could have been otherwise if its being otherwise requires that *every earlier link* have been otherwise. But this objection seems to stem from the false assumption that no two infinite regresses, each of whose members is necessitated by previous members, could differ in every one of their members. Arithmetic offers many counterexamples: the positive and the negative integers, the prime numbers and the perfect squares, and so on. In each of those pairs of regresses, every member is necessitated by its relation to previous members. Yet the two regresses have no members in common. Analogously, any deterministic infinite regress of contingencies could have differed at any stage by differing at *every* stage. This objection therefore leaves the worldview I'm recommending unscathed. A deterministic regress of 'contingencies all the way down' answers every rationalistic demand while avoiding the fatal flaws of necessitarianism.