DIVINE NECESSITY

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THE subject of this paper is the doctrine of divine necessity, the belief that God's existence is necessary in the strongest possible sense—that it is not merely causally or physically or hypothetically, but logically or metaphysically or absolutely necessary. When I use 'necessary' (and its modal relatives) below, I shall normally be using it in this strong sense (and them in corresponding senses). I will not attempt to prove here that God's existence is necessary, nor even that God exists, though some theoretical advantages of theistic belief will be noted in the course of discussion. Nor will I try to explain exactly *how* God's existence can be necessary. I believe the most plausible form of the doctrine of divine necessity is the Thomistic view [i.e. the view of St. Thomas Aquinas] that God's existence follows necessarily from His essence but that we do not understand God's essence well enough to see how His existence follows from it. What I will attempt is to refute two principal objections to the doctrine of divine necessity—two influential reasons for thinking that the existence of God, or indeed of any concrete being, could not be necessary.[1]

I

Many philosophers have believed that the proposition that a certain thing or kind of thing exists is simply not of the right *form* to be a necessary truth. …

In this section, Adams discusses one objection to the claim that God's existence is logically necessary. If God's existence is logically necessary, then the proposition "God exists" is logically necessary, but (generally speaking at least) such *existential* propositions cannot be logically necessary. (An existential proposition is one that says a certain kind of thing exists. For example, "A 200 pound dog exists", "There is a plesiosaur in Loch Ness", etc.)

[1] I have treated this subject before. The two objections roughly correspond to the second and third discussed in my "Has It Been Proved that All Real Existence Is Contingent?" *American Philosophical Quarterly,* VIII, 3 (July 1971): 284-291. I do not substantially disagree with what I said there, but what is said here is different and, I hope, goes deeper.

A logically necessary proposition is one that is a logical consequence of the empty set. This means that a logical necessity can (in principle) be proved without using any premises. This sounds odd, because in logical inference you normally need premises in order to derive a conclusion. If, without using any premises, I inferred that it will rain tomorrow, you would be very sceptical I hope! However, there are certain statements that *can* be logically derived without premises. For example, a conditional $P \rightarrow Q$ ("if P then Q") will be a logical necessity in every case where Q itself is a consequence of P. For example, since "Fred is married" follows from "Fred is a husband", the conditional "Fred is a husband $\rightarrow$ Fred is married" is logically necessary.

In a similar way, universal conditionals can be logically necessary, such as "All husbands are married". Also, *negative* existentials can be logically necessary, e.g. "No triangle has four sides". But there don't seem to be any *existential* sentences that are logically necessary, beyond some trivial cases that don't seem relevant to the question of God's existence.

In response to this problem, Adams argues that the concepts of logical necessity and consequence are not too well understood at present. For example, if an object is green, does it follow that it has spatial properties? Adams thinks that it *does* follow, even though it doesn't follow under standard accounts of logical necessity. Thus, in the absence of a clear understanding of necessity, it would be rash to rule out the logical necessity of God's existence. Here is Adam's concluding paragraph of Section I:

Now of course I have not proved that the existence of God, or of any other particular being or kind of being, is necessary. What I think can be shown by such arguments as I have been presenting is that we are not likely to get a satisfying analysis of necessity from which it will follow that such existence cannot be necessary. That is because we are not likely to get a satisfying analysis of necessity at all. I think we have a good enough grasp on the notion to go on using it, unanalyzed; but we do not understand the nature of necessity as well as we would like to. Such understanding as we have does not rule out necessity for existential propositions. Aquinas's supposition that God's existence follows necessarily from His essence although we do not see how it does is quite compatible with the state of our knowledge of the nature of necessity.

II

Another objection to the doctrine of divine necessity is that if God exists His existence is too real to be necessary. Many philosophers believe that absolute necessity is "logical" or "conceptual" in such a way as to be confined to a mental or abstract realm and that it cannot escape from this playground of the logicians to determine the real world in any way. On this view necessary truths cannot be "about the world," and cannot explain any real existence or real event, but can only reveal features of, or relations among, abstract or mental objects such as concepts or meanings. They cannot govern reality, but can only determine how we ought to think or speak about reality.

If, on the other hand, it is a necessary truth that God exists, this must be a necessary truth that explains a real existence (God's); indeed it provides the ultimate explanation of all real existence, since God is the creator of everything else that really exists. Thus if God's existence follows from His essence in such a way as to be necessary, His essence is no mere logicians' plaything but a supremely powerful cause. This is a scandal for the view that necessary truths cannot determine or explain reality.

This view is extremely questionable, however. It is not, I think, the first view that would suggest itself to common sense. If we think about the role that elaborate mathematical calculations play in scientists' predictions and explanations of, say, the movements of the planets or the behavior of a rocket, it seems commonsensical to say that the necessary truths of mathematics that enter into those calculations also contribute something to the determination of the real events and form part of the explanation of them. The doctrine that necessary truths cannot determine or explain reality is also not the only view that has commended itself to philosophers. The extremely influential Aristotelian conception of a "formal cause," for example, can be understood as the conception of a cause that governs the action of a real thing by a logical or quasi-logical necessity. It is far from obvious that necessary truths cannot cause or explain any real existence or real event; why should we believe that they can't?

I suspect that the most influential ground for the belief that necessary truths are not "about the world" is epistemological. This motive is clearly articulated by A. J. Ayer, when he writes that if we admit that some necessary truths are about the world,

> we shall be obliged to admit that there are some truths about the world which we can know independently of experience; that there are some properties which we can ascribe to all objects, even though we cannot conceivably observe that all objects have them. And we shall have to accept it as a mysterious inexplicable fact that our thought has this power to reveal to us authoritatively the nature of objects which we have never observed.[2]

The main assumptions of this argument seem to be, first, that if necessary truths are about the world, we can sometimes know that they apply to objects that we have not experienced; and second, that if we know something about an object, there must be some explanation of how it comes to pass that our beliefs agree with the object. Both of these assumptions are plausible. Ayer seems to make a third assumption, with which I will disagree, that the only way in which agreement of our beliefs with a real object can be explained is through experience of that object. (Ayer mentions as an alternative, but only to dismiss it, "the Kantian explanation"—presumably that our mind imposes necessary truths on the world.[3]) From these three assumptions it follows that necessary truths are not about the world.

Before we draw this conclusion, however, we should ask whether our knowledge of necessary truths is any more explicable on the view that they reveal only features or relations of abstract or mental objects such as concepts or meanings. I think it is not. For if necessary truths reveal features or relations of thoughts, they reveal features or relations of thoughts that we have not yet thought, as well as of those that we have thought. If I know that modus ponens is a valid argument form, I know that it will be valid for thoughts that I think tomorrow as well as for those I have thought today. If this is a knowledge of properties and relations of the thoughts involved, the question how I can know properties and relations of thoughts I have not yet experienced seems as pressing as the question how I could know properties and relations of objects outside my mind that I had not yet experienced. The retreat to abstract or mental objects does not help to explain what we want explained.

The prospects for explanation are not any better if we accept an idea that Ayer espouses in *Language, Truth and Logic.* He says that necessary truths (which he regards as all analytic) "simply record our determination to use words in a certain fashion," so that "we cannot deny them without infringing the conventions which are presupposed by our very denial, and so falling into self-contradiction" (84). I grant that there is no special problem about how we can know the determinations, intentions, or conventions that we have adopted for the use of words. But that is not all that we know in knowing necessary truths that will govern our thoughts tomorrow. We also know what follows (necessarily) from our determinations and which intentions would (necessarily) be

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[2] *Language, Truth and Logic,* 2nd ed. (New York: Dover, no date), p. 73.

[3] *Ibid.,* p. 73. Induction is another way in which beliefs are extended beyond experience. It would not be plausible, however, to say that the beliefs that concern us here are based on induction from experience—and there may also be comparable problems in explaining why our inductive processes are reliable with regard to future events that have not influenced them.

inconsistent with other intentions, tomorrow as well as today. We know, in Ayer's words, what "we *cannot* deny ... without infringing" our conventions or determinations. And we are still without an explanation of how we can know these properties of thoughts we have not yet experienced.

Given that we know things about our future thoughts which we have not learned from experience of them, it is reasonable to suppose that we have a faculty for recognizing such truths nonempirically. We would expect a theory of natural selection to provide the most promising naturalistic explanation of our possessing such a faculty. True belief is in general conducive to survival; hence individuals with a hereditary ability to recognize truths will have survived and passed on their hereditary ability to their descendants. This does indeed provide a possible explanation of our having the perceptual ability to recognize truths about our physical environment. Perhaps it also gives an acceptable explanation of our possessing the power to recognize simple truths of arithmetic. The ability to count, add, subtract, and multiply small numbers correctly has survival value. We may well suppose that under the conditions prevailing during the formative periods of human evolution humanoids that usually or systematically made gross errors about such things would have been less likely to survive and reproduce themselves. (Be it noted, however, that this argument seems to assume that the *truth* of arithmetical propositions makes a difference to what happens in the world. This assumption seems to fit better with the view that necessary truths can determine reality than with the contrary opinion.) But there are aspects of our knowledge of necessary truths for which this evolutionary explanation is less satisfying. That is particularly true of the knowledge of modality which most concerns us in this discussion. During the formative periods of human evolution, what survival value was there in recognizing necessary truths as necessary, rather than merely as true? Very little, I should think. Logical or absolute necessity as such is a philosophoumenon [an abstract philosophical concept?] which would hardly have helped the primitive hunter or gatherer in finding food or shelter; nor does it seem in any way important to the building of a viable primitive society. Those of us who think we have some faculty for recognizing truth on many of the issues discussed in this paper can hardly believe that such a faculty was of much use to our evolving ancestors; nor is there any obvious way in which such a faculty, and its reliability, are inevitable by-products of faculties that did have survival value.

The prospects for explanation of our knowledge of necessary truth may actually be brighter on the view that necessary truths can determine and explain reality. For then we may be able to appeal to an explanation in terms of formal cause. For example, we might suppose that it is simply the nature of the human mind, or perhaps of mind as such, to be able to recognize necessary truths. Then the explanation (and indeed the cause) of our recognizing necessary truths as such

would be that this recognition follows necessarily from the nature of our minds together with the fact that the truths in question are necessary.

I do not believe the explanation I have just sketched. We are too easily mistaken about necessary truths and too often unable to recognize them. And there is too much reason to believe that other mechanisms or causal processes are involved in our knowing them. But I do seriously entertain the hypothesis that there is a mind to whose nature it simply pertains to be able to recognize necessary truths. Indeed I am inclined to believe that such a mind belongs to God.

And that opens the way for another explanation of our knowledge of necessary truths, an explanation in terms of divine illumination. Suppose that necessary truths do determine and explain facts about the real world. If God of His very nature knows the necessary truths, and if He has created us, He could have constructed us in such a way that we would at least commonly recognize necessary truths as necessary. In this way there would be a causal connection between what is necessarily true about real objects and our believing it to be necessarily true about them. It would not be an incredible accident or an inexplicable mystery that our beliefs agreed with the objects in this.

This theory is not new. It is Augustinian, and something like it was widely accepted in the medieval and early modern periods. I think it provides the best explanation available to us for our knowledge of necessary truths. I also think that that fact constitutes an argument for the existence of God. Not a demonstration; it is a mistake to expect conclusive demonstrations in such matters. But it is a theoretical advantage of theistic belief that it provides attractive explanations of things otherwise hard to explain.

It is worth noting that this is not the only point in the philosophy of logic at which Augustinian theism provides an attractive explanation. Another is the ontological status of the objects of logic and mathematics. To many of us both of the following views seem extremely plausible. (I) Possibilities and necessary truths are discovered, not made, by our thought. They would still be there if none of us humans ever thought of them. (2) Possibilities and necessary truths cannot be there except insofar as they, or the ideas involved in them, are thought by some mind. The first of these views seems to require Platonism; the second is a repudiation of it. Yet they can both be held together if we suppose that there is a nonhuman mind that eternally and necessarily exists and thinks all the possibilities and necessary truths. Such is the mind of God, according to Augustinian theism. I would not claim that such theism provides the only

conceivable way of combining these two theses; but it does provide one way, and I think the most attractive.[4]

There are many things that I have not explained, and indeed do not know how to explain, about the necessity of God's existence and the necessity of His knowledge of necessary truths. But I hope I have given some reason to believe that the doctrine of divine necessity does not saddle us with problems about either the nature or the knowledge of necessity which could be avoided, or solved more advantageously, on views incompatible with divine necessity.

[4] One readily available classic text in which this point is exploited as the basis for an argument for the existence of God is Leibniz's *Monadology,* sections 43 and 44. Alvin Plantinga makes similar use of it at the conclusion of his recent Presidential address to the Western Division of the American Philosophical Association. My general indebtedness to the philosophy of Leibniz in the second part of this paper is great.