Contingentism in Metaphysics

David Chalmers
Contingentism

Can metaphysical truths be contingent?

If so, which, and why?
Examples

- Global: physicalism vs not
- Fundamentals: Atoms vs gunk
- Intrinsics: Powers vs quiddities
- Time: A-theory vs B-theory
- Laws: Humeanism vs not
- Properties: tropes vs. universals
- Mind: physicalism about consciousness vs not
- Composition: universalism vs nihilism vs...
- Persistence: Perdurance vs endurance.
- Numbers: Platonism vs nominalism
Fundamental and Derivative Truths

- Attractive picture: There is a class of fundamental truths $F$, such that all truths obtain in virtue of the truths in $F$.

- Then most interesting for metaphysics are:
  - The fundamental truths $F$
  - Grounding truths $F^* \rightarrow G$, and underlying grounding principles.
Tempting claim: Fundamental truths are contingent, grounding truths are necessary.

F->G plausibly entails ‘Necessary, if F then G’ , and plausibly requires ‘Necessary, F -> G’.

But if grounding is stronger than necessitation, it may be that certain fundamental truths are necessary

E.g. mathematical axioms?
Necessitation

One might work instead with necessitation: there is a minimal class of truths $F$ such that truths in $F$ necessitate all truths.

- For all truths in $G$, there exists a conjunction of $F$-truths $F^*$ such that necessarily, if $F^*$ then $G$.
- If the box iterates, then these necessitation truths will themselves be necessary.
- So all contingency can be traced to base truths: truths in the supervenience base.
Supervenience Bases

- Widely held: A supervenience base is something like the class of microphysical truths, or microphysical and phenomenal truths.

- If this is correct, then the contingency of any truth will derive from the contingency of truths in such a base.
Diagnostic

Suggests a diagnostic:
- If a metaphysical thesis M is contingent, its contingency should be inherited from some corresponding contingency in the base.
  - Not very plausible for numbers, composition
  - Very plausible for physicalism, atoms vs gunk
  - Somewhat plausible for quiddities, laws.
  - Not obvious for time, properties

Of course, the contingentist might always suggest that the supervenience base needs to be expanded…
On a broadly 2D picture, if a class $C$ of (neutral) fundamental truths necessitates all truths, then $C$ plus indexicals a priori entail all truths.

- E.g. if $PQT$ necessitates all truths, $PQTI$ a priori entails all truths.

Contrapositively, contingentist can argue:

- $PQTI$ doesn’t a priori entail truth $M$.
- So $PQT$ doesn’t necessitate truth $M$.
- So we need to expand the necessitation base.
Conceivability Arguments for Contingentism

Given a metaphysical thesis M:

1. Both M and ~M are conceivable
2. Conceivability entail possibility
   
3. Both M and ~M are possible

Here ‘conceivably M’ = ‘it is not a priori that ~M’.

‘Possible’ = ‘Metaphysically possible’.
2D Version

Kripke cases suggest that premise 2 is false, but a 2D analysis of these cases suggests that a modified version is true.

- (1) Both M and ~M are conceivable
- (2) For semantically neutral statements, conceivability entail possibility
- (3) M is semantically neutral
- (4) Both M and ~M are possible.
In most of the example cases, someone might suggest that M and ~M are conceivable:
- Time, properties, composition, numbers, physicalism, physicalism about consciousness, quiddities, gunk, laws...

And in most of these cases there is a reasonable case that the key terms are semantically neutral.

So contingentism about all these cases follows?
Alternatives

- Faced with such a case, one can
  - Deny premise (1): M or ~M is a priori
  - Deny premise (3): M is semantically non-neutral
  - Deflate the debate: e.g. M1 and ~M2 are possible.
  - Accept the conclusion: M is contingent

- [Or: deny premise (2): there are strong necessities.]
Strategy 1: Apriority

- Strategy 1: The debate can be settled a priori, and one alternative is not ideally conceivable.
  - Tropes/universals?
  - Existence of numbers?
  - Physicalism about consciousness?
Strategy 2: Rigidification

- Strategy 2: Find some semantic non-neutrality in a key term (typically rigidification on actual referent) yielding Kripke-style a posteriori necessities
  - Time, properties?
  - Consciousness, laws, etc? [DBM]

- I think it’s doubtful that many metaphysical terms work this way
- Even when they do, a form of contingentism returns:
  - There are worlds where the alternative view is true of schmoperties, schmonsciousness, schlaws, schmime…
- And one can usually find multiple neutral terms in the vicinity disambiguating “law”, “time”, etc, with necessitary/apriori theses
  - Not far from the disambiguation strategy.
Strategy 3: Deflate/Disambiguate

- Strategy 3: Find something wrong with the debate: e.g. key concepts are defective or ambiguous, or there’s no fact of the matter.

  - E.g. composition/existence debates?
    - Universal composition applies to exist1, nihilism to exist2

- Laws vs laws, Time vs time
  - Nonhumeanism true of Laws, Humeanism of laws
  - A-theory true of Time, B-theory true of time
  - There remains a question of whether our world contains Time, Laws, etc.
Strategy 4: Contingentism

- Strategy 4: M is contingent.

- Either
  - M vs ~M is reflected in the existing fundamental base (e.g. physicalism, atoms vs gunk)
  - The fundamental base must be expanded/refined to settle M vs ~M
    - Maybe plausible for quiddities?
    - A version perhaps tenable for laws, time
      - (Hume/nonHume worlds, A-time/B-time worlds?)
    - Dubious for composition, numbers, properties
The Conceivability Argument Against Contingentism

(1) There are not positively conceivable worlds in which M and ~M.

(2) If (1), then it is not both possible that M and possible that ~M.

_________________

(3) It is not both possible that M and possible that ~M.
Support for Premise (1)

For some M (e.g. numbers, composition, properties?), it is difficult to form any imaginative conception of what the difference between an M-world and a ~M-world would consist in.

- In trying to imagine a world with numbers and a world without numbers, I seem to imagine the same situation.
- One can’t get any grip on what God would have to do to create an M-world as opposed to a ~M-world, or vice versa.

Contrast M for which this is more plausible: physicalism, atoms/gunk; arguably intrinsics, laws, time.
Failure of positive conceivability is arguably evidence of impossibility

- Possibility doesn’t entail prima facie positive conceivability, but it is at least arguably that possibility entails ideal positive conceivability.
- At least failures of positive conceivability require some sort of explanation.

Situations where there is (arguably) negative conceivability of both M and ~M without positive conceivability of both M and ~M should at least lead us to question whether we really have a grip on a substantive difference between M and ~M.
- Reconsider apriority and deflation strategies.
Let’s say that weak contingentism is contingentism where the contingency derives from that of PQ (e.g. physicalism, gunk).

Strong contingentism is contingentism without weak contingentism.

Strong contingentism requires pairs of (superficially) physically/phenomenally identical worlds, with further differences in M.

- Just maybe: quiddities, laws, time
- Very dubiously: existence, composition, persistence.
Another Conceivability Argument

(1) Strong contingentism requires PQ-worlds in which M and ~M.

(2) We cannot positively conceive of PQ-worlds in which M and ~M.

(3) If (2), then PQ is not compossible with both M and ~M.

(4) Strong contingentism is false
Strategy 5: Embrace strong metaphysical necessities that rule out one of two ideally conceivable options (and not via 2D structure).

One might be forced in this direction if one thinks that the apriority, deflation, and rigidification strategies fail, and that contingentism is unacceptable.

- Perhaps in the case of existence, composition, persistence, properties?

- E.g. postulating substantive a posteriori laws of metaphysics that settle the matter.
Worry 1: Why Reject Contingentism?

What are this theorist’s reasons for rejecting contingentism, and why aren’t they also reasons to reject this view?

One reason: Failure of positive conceivability of M and ~M.
   - But: that gives at least some reason to be doubtful about strong necessities.

Second reason: We need to M to be uniform across worlds, to compare worlds (cf. properties)
   - But: arguably the same issue arises for conceivable scenarios
   - Why not have an inner sphere of worlds across which M is uniform, without giving this uniformity some independent modal status?

Another reason: Intuition that if M is true, it must be necessary.
   - But: Where does this intuition come from?
Worry 2: Brute Necessities

- Worry 2: Strong necessities will be inexplicable brute necessities
- One might think: Any brute a posteriori principles should be treated as a (contingent) fundamental law of nature
- Question: Why couldn’t God have created a world in which M is false?
The God Argument

1. ~M is ideally conceivable
2. If M is ideally conceivable, God can conceive of ~M.
3. If God can conceive of ~M, God could have actualized ~M
4. If God could have actualized ~M, ~M is metaphysically possible.

___________

5. M is metaphysically possible

N.B. Premise (3) assumes that M is semantically neutral; else we can use a version involving primary intensions.
Worry 3: What is Metaphysical Necessity?

- What is metaphysical necessity, such that it can come apart strongly from conceptual/logical necessity?

- Do we really have a grip on such a notion?

- Arguably: conceptual/logical necessity can play the key roles that metaphysical necessity is supposed to play.
John: Maybe there are further roles that metaphysical necessity can play; and maybe, even if we have don’t have an independent grip on it, we can conceive of it as that sort of necessity that plays these roles.

I’m doubtful about whether there really are such important roles that are well-played by metaphysical necessity.

I’m also doubtful about applying the Ramsey method to philosophical space, as opposed to empirical space.

But: this raises lots of interesting issues.
Jonathan: Perhaps we can give an alternative construal of metaphysical necessity
- E.g. not as a primitive modality, but instead defining it in terms of worlds where metaphysical laws/principles hold, or in some other way.

If so, then maybe there will be less reason to reject the corresponding sort of strong necessity
- But one can still ask: in virtue of what are the metaphysical laws metaphysical laws?
- And: in what sense do they deserve to count as necessary, in a sense that is significantly stronger than nomological necessity?

In any case: the notion of metaphysical necessity, and its status as primitive or analyzable, deserves close attention here.
Limited Contingentism

- My own view: all truths are a priori necessitated by truths in a small fundamental base, specifiable using a few primitive concepts.
- The limits of variation in the fundamental base are roughly the limits of positive conceivability.
- In the actual world, any contingency (and a posteriority) derives from contingency (and a posteriority) in P, Q, and T.
Half-Empty/Half-Full Conclusion

- Pessimistic take: There’s still a lot of contingent and a posteriori metaphysics to settle in P, Q, and T, and we’re highly non-ideal reasoners.

- Optimistic take: If we can just settle the contingent/a posteriori truths in P, Q, and T, then (by good enough reasoning) we can settle everything.