



Contingentism in Metaphysics

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Contingentism

Can metaphysical truths be contingent?

If so, which, and why?

Examples

- Global: physicalism vs not
 - Fundamentals: Atoms vs gunk
 - Intrinsic: 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
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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.
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Fundamental and Derivative Truths

- Tempting claim: Fundamental truths are contingent, grounding truths are necessary.
 - $F \rightarrow G$ plausibly entails 'Necessary, if F then G', and plausibly requires 'Necessary, $F \rightarrow G$ '.
 - But if grounding is stronger than necessitation, it may be that certain fundamental truths are necessary
 - E.g. mathematical axioms?
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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.
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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.
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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...
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Necessitation and Apriority

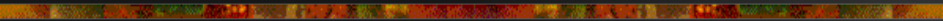
- On a broadly 2D picture, if a class C of (neutral) fundamental truths necessitates all truths, then C plus indexicals a priori entail all truths
 - E.g. if PQT necessitates all truths, PQTI a priori entails all truths
 - Contrapositively, contingentist can argue
 - PQTI doesn't a priori entail truth M
 - So PQT doesn't necessitate truth M
 - So we need to expand the necessitation base.
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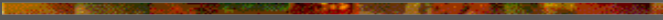
Conceivability Arguments for Contingentism

- Given a metaphysical thesis M:
 - (1) Both M and $\sim M$ are conceivable
 - (2) Conceivability entail possibility

 - (3) Both M and $\sim M$ are possible
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- Here ‘conceivably M’ = ‘it is not a priori that $\sim M$ ’.
 - ‘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 $\sim M$ are conceivable
 - (2) For semantically neutral statements, conceivability entail possibility
 - (3) M is semantically neutral
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- (4) Both M and $\sim M$ are possible.
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Contingentism Explodes

- In most of the example cases, someone might suggest that M and $\sim M$ 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?
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Alternatives

- Faced with such a case, one can
 - Deny premise (1): M or $\sim M$ is a priori
 - Deny premise (3): M is semantically non-neutral
 - Deflate the debate: e.g. $M1$ and $\sim M2$ are possible.
 - Accept the conclusion: M is contingent
 - [Or: deny premise (2): there are strong necessities.]
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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?
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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 necessary/apriori theses
 - Not far from the disambiguation strategy.
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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.
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Strategy 4: Contingentism

- Strategy 4: M is contingent.
 - Either
 - M vs $\sim$ 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 $\sim$ 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
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The Conceivability Argument Against Contingentism

- (1) There are not positively conceivable worlds in which M and $\sim M$.
 - (2) If (1), then it is not both possible that M and possible that $\sim M$.
 - _____
- (3) It is not both possible that M and possible that $\sim M$.
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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 $\sim$ 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 $\sim$ M-world, or vice versa.
 - Contrast M for which this is more plausible: physicalism, atoms/gunk; arguably intrinsics, laws, time.
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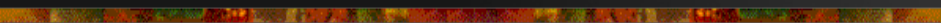
Support for Premise (2)

- 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 $\sim M$ without positive conceivability of both M and $\sim M$ should at least lead us to question whether we really have a grip on a substantive difference between M and $\sim M$
 - Reconsider apriority and deflation strategies.
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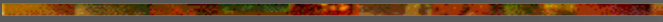
Weak and Strong Contingentism

- 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.
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Another Conceivability Argument



- (1) Strong contingentism requires PQ-worlds in which M and $\sim M$.
- (2) We cannot positively conceive of PQ-worlds in which M and $\sim M$.
- (3) If (2), then PQ is not compossible with both M and $\sim M$.

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- (4) Strong contingentism is false
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Strategy 5: Strong Necessities

- 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.
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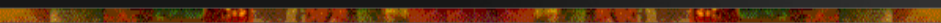
Worry 1: Why Reject Contingentism?

- 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 $\sim M$.
 - 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?
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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?
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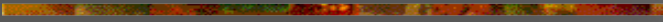
The God Argument



- (1) $\sim M$ is ideally conceivable
- (2) If M is ideally conceivable, God can conceive of $\sim M$.
- (3) If God can conceive of $\sim M$, God could have actualized $\sim M$
- (4) If God could have actualized $\sim M$, $\sim M$ is metaphysically possible.

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- (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.
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Further Explanatory Roles?

- John: Maybe there are further roles that metaphysical necessity can play; and maybe, even if we haven't got 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.
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Other Construals of Metaphysical Necessity

- 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 to 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.
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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.
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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.
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