Prospects for a sound stage 3 of cosmological arguments

JEROME GELLMAN

Department of Philosophy, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-sheva 84105, Israel

Abstract: Recently, *Religious Studies* published an article by Richard Gale and Alexander Pruss, arguing that there exists a necessary being who is a creator of the world. Building on their argument, I argue that, assuming that there is exactly one creator, that creator is essentially omnipotent.

Introduction

'Optimal' cosmological arguments contain sub-arguments, respectively, for each of the following:

(1)   There exists at least one necessary being who freely creates the world.
(2)   There exists no more than one necessary being who freely creates the world.
(3)   The one necessary being who freely creates the world is essentially: omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.

Historically, as in Maimonides, Aquinas, and Samuel Clarke, philosophers grounded stages (2) and (3) with reference to the independence and simplicity of the necessary being of (1). These efforts have not met with recognized success. I wish to make a new start with the prospects of showing (3) true, on the basis of (1) and (2).[1] Here I will treat of essential omnipotence only.

I choose to work with a recent, new form of a stage (1) cosmological argument by Richard Gale and Alexander Pruss, in *Religious Studies*.[2] It has the twin advantages of being a most promising stage (1) argument in itself, and suggestive of how we might try to proceed to stage (3). Gale and Pruss's argument depends on a weak form of the Principle of Sufficient Reason: for any contingent proposition *p*, there is some possible world (at least) in which *p* has an explanation. Their stage (1) argument entails the strong conclusion that:

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> There exists at least one necessary being N, such that the obtaining of each actual contingent fact is explained by a free act of N.

I will assume the conjunction of Pruss and Gale's stage (1) with the stage (2) analogue of (1). Together they entail:

> (NB)   There exists exactly one necessary being N, such that the obtaining of each actual contingent fact (in the actual world) is explained by a free act of N,

and will argue from there that N is essentially omnipotent.

Our necessary being's acts must be libertarian free.[3] Otherwise, its acts would be contingent, explained, according to (NB), by an act of our necessary being. Since no non-free contingent act could explain itself, we would generate an un-wanted infinite regress of explanatory acts by our necessary beings. If, on the other hand, the explanatory act were libertarian free, it would require no *further* act to explain it. A free act of our necessary being is fully explained by the necessary fact that the being in question exists, together with the fact that the act was free. The free act of a necessary being, as Richard Swinburne observes, is an explanation stopper.[4]

Essential omnipotence

Letting 'Nec' name our necessary being, I now argue that Nec is essentially omnipotent.

> Lemma 1   Whatever power state P, Nec has in the actual world W*,
> Nec has *essentially*,

where a *power state* of Nec is individuated by the powers of Nec and the degrees to which Nec has each power.

Argument for Lemma 1

Suppose Nec is in power state P, in the actual world W*, and that P is not essential to Nec. So, it is a *contingent* fact about Nec that it is in power state P in W*. By (NB), however, the explanation for all contingent facts in W* is in a free act of Nec. So Nec's free act must explain Nec's being in power state P. Now, if Nec acts to bring itself power state P, Nec would already have to be in some power state or other, P1. In power state, P1, Nec would 'know how' to bring about its being in P. P1 may be distinct from P or may be identical with P. (The latter could be when Nec will lose P if it does not act to continue in P.)

Where P $\neq$ P1, if Nec could lose P1, P1 is not essential. Where P = P1, if Nec could *lose* P unless freely acting to continue it, then P1, that is, P, cannot be essential to Nec. So either way, that Nec was in power state P1 would have to be a contingent fact. The contingent fact that Nec is in P1 will be explained by a free act of Nec's. This, by a repeat of our prior reasoning, would require in turn that Nec have been

in a power state P2, and have freely chosen to be in P1. By similar reasoning, we obtain an infinite series of freely chosen acts by Nec, until it reaches power state P with which we started. This is repugnant to reason.

Therefore, whatever power state P, Nec has in the actual world, Nec has *essentially*.

Consider the following objection to my argument for Lemma 1, suggested to me by Alexander Pruss. The infinite regress of Nec's new power states can be stopped without positing that Nec's existing power state is essential. We may assume, instead, that Nec's *starting* power state is essential to Nec. From the starting point, Nec can choose a *post-starting* power state. Nec could have the same *starting* power state in every possible world. Nec could freely choose to have a lesser power state, the same power state, or grant itself a higher state of power, if it knows how to do so. The infinite regress would terminate with Nec's essential *starting* state of power. Nec's *present* power state could be contingent.

This objection will not stand if we make two assumptions:

> (F1)   If Nec has free will at any time, Nec always has free will;[5] and
> (F2)   If at any time when Nec is free, Nec has the freedom to bring about its power state, then at every time when Nec is free, Nec has the freedom to bring about its power state.[6]

According to the objection I am considering, there does exist some time at which Nec can freely bring about its own power state. Hence, together with (F1) and (F2) we may conclude that Nec always has freedom and is always free to bring about its own power state. In particular, it follows that:

> For every time t, there is a time t_1, prior to t, such that if Nec has power state P, at t, then at t_1 Nec was free to choose not to have P at t.

Add to this the obviously true proposition that:

> If *having power state P at* t is an essential property of x, then there is no time t_1, prior to t, at which x is free to bring about its not having P at t.

It follows that there is no time t, such that Nec's *having power state P, at t* is an essential property of x. Hence, there is no time at which Nec has a starting power state such that it is essential that Nec have it at that time.

So the objection fails *if* we accept (F1) and (F2). Why, though, should we accept them? There are two possible scenarios in which they are not both true.

Scenario 1

Nec does not always have free will. Rather, Nec acquires free will at some point. In order that this not be a contingent fact, and thus itself in need of an explanation in terms of Nec's free choice, we have to set down that it is a broadly

necessary truth that Nec gets free will after not having had it. So, there *is* a time *t*, such that there was no time prior to *t* at which Nec had it in Nec's power to freely bring about its power state at *t*. This would be a time before Nec got libertarian freedom. If so, Nec could have an essential starting power state, before ever having free will.

Scenario 2

Nec always has free will. However, initially Nec's freedom does not include Nec's ability to freely bring about Nec's power state. That is because Nec's starting power state was essential to Nec. At some point, Nec gets for the first time its ability to freely bring about its own state. This getting of the power to choose its own power state would have to be a necessary event about Nec. (If it were a contingent event, Nec would have to choose it. Then, at pain of entering an infinite regress, Nec would always have to have had the freedom to choose to be free to choose its power state. This however, is tantamount to Nec always being free to choose its own power state, which we are now denying.) Hence, there will be a time *t*, such that at *t* Nec has Nec's starting state of power, and is such that at no time prior to *t* was Nec able to freely choose what Nec's power state would be at *t*. Thus the idea of an essential starting power is not impugned.

Comment on scenarios

Either of these scenarios presents an ad hoc alternative to (F1) and (F2), respectively. On (F1) and (F2), Nec always has free will and is always free to choose its own power state. To deny (F1) we have to suppose that there is a logically necessary process that grants free will to Nec after Nec's not having had it. To deny (F2), we have to suppose that there is a logically necessary process that grants free will to Nec to choose what power state it will be in, after Nec's not having had freedom to so choose, even though Nec has always possessed free will. Whenever possible it is preferable to avoid ad hoc assumptions in favour of simpler, smoother, hypotheses.[7] (F1) and (F2) are far simpler and smoother than their alternatives. That is why scenarios 1 and 2 may well strike (some of) us as somewhat 'implausible'. They are 'implausible', not in the light of counterevidence, but because they have the aroma of being ad hoc. In short, (F1) and (F2) are to be preferred over the alternative scenarios. Hence, Lemma 1 stands.

In so defending against the present objection, I concede that my argument is deductively valid only if we add (F1) and (F2) to my premises. I add them on grounds of simplicity, which I take to be a theory-building desideratum, and not based on a necessary truth. So I have not called my argument a 'proof'. Instead, I present it as a good 'argument' that includes some premises that are (merely) preferable to their denials.

I conclude, given our opening assumptions, that there exists a necessary being, Nec, such that Nec has its power state (whatever it is) essentially. It might appear

to some that we have enough now to conclude that Nec is essentially omnipotent. After all, each contingent truth in our world is explained by Nec's choice that it obtain, rather than not obtain. This means, in effect, that Nec can choose for the world to be whatever Nec desires it to be. This seems to be equivalent to Nec being omnipotent. Since I have argued that Nec's power state is essential to Nec, it seems to follow that Nec is essentially omnipotent.

The flaw in the above reasoning is that Nec's being able to choose whatever world Nec wishes does not entail that Nec is omnipotent. Nec may be able to *choose* whatever world Nec wants, yet it hardly follows that all of Nec's choices will be effective. There may be (necessary) limitations on the effectiveness of Nec's choices, there being some choices such that if Nec made them would not result in the bringing about the chosen states of affairs. Indeed, Nec, for all we know at this stage, may not be aware of whether Nec's choices are entirely effective 'on the ground'. So, we are in no position so far to conclude that Nec is omnipotent and omnipotent essentially. More is required. For that purpose I proceed with an argument for Lemma 2:

> Lemma 2   There exists exactly one necessary being N, such that in every possible world W, N's free actions in W explain all the contingent truths of W.

Argument for Lemma 2

We are assuming that (NB) has been shown true for the actual world. Assuming that the weak Principle of Sufficient Reason is a necessary truth, we may safely conclude that an (NB) analogue is true for every possible world. Therefore:

> For each possible world W, there exists *some necessary being or other* in whom is found the explanation for all the contingent truths of that world W.

I now show that:

> There exists a necessary being N, such that in every possible world W, the free actions of N in W explain all the contingent truths of W.

Suppose there were two necessary beings, Nec 1 and Nec 2, such that in Nec 1 lies the explanation for all the contingent facts in W1, and in Nec 2 lies the explanation of all the contingent facts in W2, and that W1 ≠ W2.

Now in W1, either Nec 2 has *creative power* over Nec 1 or does not. Nec 2 has 'creative power' over Nec 1, when Nec 2 has the power to prevent Nec 1 from creating, that is, can prevent, if so choosing, Nec 1 from choosing what contingent truths shall obtain.

If Nec 2 has creative power over Nec 1, and, by hypothesis, does not use it in W1, then it is a contingent truth in W1, that: *It is not the case that Nec 2 chooses to use its power to prevent Nec 1 from choosing the contingent truths that will obtain.* So

here would be a contingent truth in W1, namely that Nec 2 does not choose in the specified way, not explained by Nec 1's free action in W1. Hence, this side of the disjunction concerning Nec 2's having absolute power over Nec 1 contradicts the hypothesis that in W1 all the contingent truths are explained by the free act of Nec 1.

We must suppose, therefore, that in W1, Nec 2 does *not* have creative power over Nec 1. Fine. Does Nec 2 have creative power over Nec 1 in W2, where all contingent truths are due to Nec 2? Nec 2 does not, for its having such power in W2 would be a contingent fact, since it lacks the same power in W1. By an analogue of Lemma 1, it cannot be a contingent fact. Hence, in W2 Nec 2 has no power to prevent Nec 1 from choosing to create in W2. So, that Nec 1 does not *freely choose* to create in W2 will be a contingent fact not explained by an action of Nec 2. So, this side of the disjunction contradicts the hypothesis that in W2 all the contingent truths are explained by the free act of Nec 2.

Hence, the hypothesis that there are two necessary beings each explaining all the contingent facts of different worlds is self-contradictory. My argument applies equally to any number greater than two. Hence,

> Lemma 2   If there is a necessary being in whom lies the explanation of all contingent facts in the actual world, the explanation of contingent facts of all possible worlds lies as well in that same necessary being.

Argument for essential omnipotence

Lemma 2 establishes that there exists one necessary being N, such that in every possible world W, in N is to be found the explanation for all the contingent truths of W. This means that N's choices are effective for all contingent facts in every possible world. It follows that N is essentially omnipotent.

I conclude that Gale and Pruss's argument, in addition to being promising for stage (1), is also potentiating for showing that the necessary being who created the world is essentially omnipotent (given stage 2).[8] (According to the view that omnipotence entails omniscience, we can conclude that the necessary being is essentially omniscient as well.) If I am right, Gale and Pruss's argument has advanced the cause of optimal cosmological arguments in an important way.[9]

Notes

1. For an argument from simplicity that can be applied to stage (2), see Richard Swinburne *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 102–106. In what follows I argue for (3) on grounds that include, yet go beyond, considerations of simplicity.
2. Richard Gale and Alexander Pruss 'A new cosmological argument', *Religious Studies*, **35** (1999), 461–476.
3. The only exception would be acts the production of which are required by Nec's perfect goodness, if Nec is perfectly good. I will omit any further reference to this exception, since it does not affect my argument.
4. Swinburne *The Existence of God*, 103.

5. Formally, my ensuing argument will work with a weaker hypothesis, (F1*): If Nec has free will at any time, Nec had free will at all preceding times. I prefer (F1) on grounds of simplicity.

6. My ensuing argument will work as well with the weaker (F2*): If at some time when Nec is free, there is an earlier time when Nec has the freedom to bring about its own power state, then whenever Nec has free will, Nec has the freedom at every earlier time to bring about its power state.

7. I take this to be a rule for rational theory building that I apply here, and not a necessary truth.

8. Alas, I have not established the stage (2) analogue. I invite readers of this paper to consider ways the stage (2) analogue might be shown true.

9. I am grateful to Richard Gale and Alexander Pruss, and to my colleague Yakir Levine, as well as to anonymous referees for *Religious Studies*, for their helpful comments and suggestions.