

## ***Handout for the Contingency Argument***

The Contingency Argument, of the argument from possibility and necessity, involves two definitions and a metaphysical principle. The definitions are

***Contingent (or possible) beings***--beings that depend on some other being for their existence. Analogously, contingent truths are truths that depend on some state of affairs for their truth.

***Necessary beings***--beings that depend only on themselves for their existence. Analogously, necessary truths that are true by virtue of their meanings.

The metaphysical principle is

***The principle of sufficient reason***--The claim that every being depends on something for its existence: either itself or something else. Analogously, every true statement can be seen to depend on something for its truth, either itself (necessary truths), or something else (contingent truths).

Notice that the two types of beings defined above are exhaustive of the types of beings there could be if and only if the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) is true. Otherwise, we could accept the existence of beings that depend on nothing at all for their existence. If this were possible, the contingency argument would not establish its conclusion. Thus, if PSR is false, the argument does not show there must be a necessary being.

Here is a summary of an argument (from Peter van Inwagen of the University of Notre Dame) that the PSR is false:

Let  $C_0$  be the very long sentence derived by joining all contingently true sentences with an 'and'.  $C_0$  will be a contingent truth and, by PSR, will depend on something for its truth.

***Example:***

***$CT_1$ =Michael has a hat on.  $CT_2$ =Michael has a shirt on.***

***$CT_3$ =Michael has a hat on and Michael has a shirt on.***

If PSR is true, the only possible things for  $C_0$  to depend on are Contingent truths or necessary truths. Herein lies the problem: Either Case 1 is true, and  $C_0$  depends on a CT or Case 2 is true and  $C_0$  depends on a NT. However, we will see that whichever case is true,  $C_0$  becomes a necessary truth, or a truth that could not have been otherwise. This is contrary to the hypothesis that  $C_0$  is contingent, so either PSR is false or there are no contingencies. Most people choose to abandon PSR (this is a big deal) and so cannot avail themselves of the Contingency Argument for the existence of God.

### **Case 1**

$C_0$  depends on some CT. But  $C_0$  is the conjunction of all CTs, so  $C_0$  depends on itself for its truth. This makes  $C_0$  a necessary truth, which we stipulated it was not. So Case 1 cannot be the case.

$C_0 = \{CT_1 \text{ and } CT_2 \text{ and } CT_3 \text{ and } CT_4 \text{ and } \dots\}$

If  $C_0$  depends on any CT, it depends on some part of itself and is self-dependent--necessary.

### **Case 2**

$C_0$  depends on a NT. But if  $C_0$  depends on a NT for its truth, then the truth of the NT makes  $C_0$  true. Since the NT is always true and could not be (or not have been) otherwise,  $C_0$  is always true and couldn't have been otherwise. But this just means that  $C_0$  is a necessary truth, which we stipulated it was not. So Case 2 cannot be the case.

Thus, either  $C_0$  is necessarily true and there are no contingent truths, or the PSR is false and there are some truths that depend on nothing at all for their truth. Either way, we're in for some trouble with respect to either the Contingency Argument or our regular beliefs.