Avicenna, *Proof of the Necessary of Existence*

Avicenna offers a proof for the existence of God based on the nature of possibility and necessity. First, we must lay out Avicenna’s view of causation, essence, and existence.

**1. The Four Causes:** Avicenna adopts Aristotle’s view of causation, according to which all things have 4 causes:

1. **Material Cause:** The material that a thing is made of.
2. **Formal Cause:** The form of the thing; the pattern or essence which the materials are arranged in conformity with.
3. **Efficient Cause:** The thing(s) that bring about the change; i.e., bring the matter and the form together.
4. **Final Cause:** The end or purpose of a thing; (often, this is the cause of the efficient cause; i.e., the reason by which the efficient cause acts).

So, for instance, the cause of some statue in the Parthenon is as follows:

1. **Material Cause:** The slab of marble.
2. **Formal Cause:** The blueprint, or design, according to which the sculptor sculpts it.
3. **Efficient Cause:** The sculptor.
4. **Final Cause:** The reason for, or purpose of, the statue’s existence—which is to adorn the Parthenon.

**2. Essence vs. Existence:** Avicenna also borrows the following distinction from Aristotle:

**Essence:** *What* a thing is; i.e., the reality by virtue of which a thing is what it is.

**Existence:** *That* a thing is; i.e., a thing actually existing in reality.

Clearly, these two concepts are distinct from one another. Avicenna writes,

“You must know that you understand the concept of triangle while in doubt as to whether or not concrete existence is attributed to triangle.” (*Remarks ...*)
The essence of a triangle is its triangularity—i.e., to be a 3-sided, 3-angled thing. You can contemplate the essence of, or the WHAT IT IS to be, a triangle—but this will not tell you THAT a triangle exists in reality.

3. Necessary vs. Contingent Existents: Everything that exists must fall into one of two categories. Either it exists, but COULD NOT have failed to exist; or, it exists, but COULD have failed to exist. He calls the former a ‘necessarily existent’ and the latter a ‘possibly existent’. He writes,

“The necessarily existent is the existence that must be, whereas the possibly existent is the one that has no “must” about it in any way, whether in terms of its existence or nonexistence.” (Book of Salvation)

Contemporary philosophers use the following terms:

- **Necessary Being**: A thing that cannot fail to exist. It must exist. Positing its non-existence results in a contradiction.

- **Contingent Being**: A thing that can exist, and can also not exist. Positing its non-existence does not result in a contradiction.

4. Why Contingent Beings Require a Cause, and Necessary Beings Do Not: Avicenna adds that possible (i.e., contingent) beings require a cause for their existence, while necessary beings do not. They have no cause. Why is this?

Consider again the essence of the triangle (i.e., triangularity). Its essence doesn’t necessitate its own existence. Its essence is INDIFFERENT to existence, so to speak. So, it needs something external to itself to “tip the scales” toward existence by causing that essence to be imprinted onto some matter. Of contingent beings, Avicenna writes,

“Thus, with respect to its essence, it would be a thing that is neither necessary nor impossible. ... That to which possibility belongs in essence does not come into existence by its essence ... It follows that the existence of every possible thing is from another.” (Remarks and Admonitions)

In short, just by considering the essence of a triangle, we see that it needs an efficient cause in order to exist. It needs existence to be ADDED TO its essence in order to exist in actuality (so it’s possible for any triangle to fail to exist, since its cause could have failed).

[He also confusing says that a contingent being is “possible through itself” but “necessary through another”. Note that this does NOT contingent beings are somehow also]
NECESSARY beings. Rather, by this he means only that, if the complete cause of some effect is present, then the effect MUST occur. For instance, once the complete cause of your parents’ conceiving you was present, it was then GUARANTEED that you would exist.

On the other hand, Avicenna says that a necessary being would be one whose essence is such that it DOES necessitate its own existence. It doesn’t need existence ADDED to its essence in order to exist. And this can only be because its essence IS existence. Any being with THAT sort of essence simply MUST exist. For, what it is is pure existence. Thus, it’s impossible for such a being to NOT exist. [For this reason, some see elements of The Ontological Argument in Avicenna’s line of reasoning. Can you see why?]

Does that make sense? The following may help: Even though I only presented two categories of existence above, Avicenna says that, conceptually, we can divide existents into THREE categories: (1) The necessary, (2) The possible, and (3) The impossible.

An impossible being would be one such that positing its existence results in a contradiction. In other words, its essence is such that it necessitates NON-existence. For instance, a square circle. The essence of (i.e., the “what it is” to be) a square circle is to be a figure composed of four sides of equal lengths, at right angles to one another, such that every point of the figure is equidistant from some central point. It is clear that positing the existence of such a thing results in a contradiction. Its essence guarantees its non-existence.

A necessary being is the opposite of this. Positing the NON-existence of such a thing results in a contradiction. Its essence guarantees its existence.

[Let me try to motivate Avicenna’s claim in another way. Perhaps this is not so very counter-intuitive if we consider an analogous case: Contingent vs. Necessary TRUTHS. Contingently true propositions are ones that could be true, and could be false. They do not contain the reason for their own truth within themselves. For instance, <Chad exists> is contingently true (i.e., it is true, but it could have been false—and in fact WILL be false again someday). That proposition doesn’t explain its own truth. Rather, its “truthmaker” (i.e., the reason for its truth, or the THING THAT MAKES IT TRUE) is me, Chad, the physical object. So, the truthmaker for <Chad exists> is something EXTERNAL to that proposition. Contrast this with a necessary truth—i.e., a truth that CANNOT be false, for instance, <All bachelors are male>. This proposition is necessarily true. It did not start being true, and it will never stop being true. It is impossible for it to be false. For, it contains the reason for its own truth WITHIN itself. Namely, the proposition is true because “bachelor” just MEANS “unmarried male”. Its “truthmaker” is in some sense INTERNAL to itself. Now imagine that truths are not the only things that are like this, but that existence can be like this too.]
5. The Proof: Here is (my synopsis of) Avicenna’s proof for God’s existence. Even this simplified version is pretty complicated, so follow it carefully:

(MP) Main Proof
1. Something exists.
2. That thing is either (a) necessary or (b) possible; i.e., contingent.
3. If (a), then a necessary being (i.e., a “necessarily existent”) exists.
4. If (b), then a necessary being exists.
5. Therefore, a necessary being exists.

(MP-4) Proof for MP, premise 4
1. If a contingent being exists, then there exists a chain of one or more causes (since all contingent beings, by definition, require a cause).
2. That causal chain either (a) terminates in a necessary being, or (b) it does not; i.e., every member of the chain of causes is contingent.
3. If (a), then a necessary being exists.
4. If (b)—i.e., if there is a chain of contingent causes (whether finite or infinite)—then the entire set (or, “totality”) is itself either (i) necessary or (ii) contingent.
5. (i) is impossible.
6. If (ii), then a necessary being exists.
7. Therefore, if a contingent being exists, then a necessary being exists.

(MP-4.5) Proof for MP-4, premise 5
1. If the entire set of contingent causes is itself necessary, then there exists a necessary being composed entirely of contingent parts.
2. However, if all of the members of a set are contingent, then the set itself must also be contingent.
3. Therefore, the entire set of contingent causes cannot be a necessary being.

(MP-4.6) Proof for MP-4, premise 6
1. If the entire set of contingent causes is itself contingent, then it requires a cause for its existence (since this is part of what it means to be a contingent being).
2. The cause of the entire set of contingent causes must either be (a) internal to that set, or (b) external to it.
3. (a) is impossible. For, if the thing that causes the entire set is a member of that set, then this is just to say that it causes itself to exist (which is impossible).
4. If (b), then the external cause of the entire set of contingent causes is itself either (i) necessary or (ii) contingent.
5. (ii) is a contradiction, since we’ve stipulated that the set is the set of all contingent causes (i.e., there are no contingent beings not included in that set).
6. Therefore, the set of all contingent causes requires a cause for its existence that is both external to that set, and is a necessary being.
6. An Explanation of the Argument: Consider the chain of events leading up to yourself: You were caused by your parents, and they by their parents, and so on. And your ancestor was caused by some event or other on the Earth, and the Earth was caused by some event or other in our solar system, etc. Now, either this series of causes (a) just STOPS at some point, or (b) it goes on forever and ever.

If (a), then as we go back in the series of causes, we must reach some first cause. But, this first cause can’t have a prior cause—otherwise, we would not have said that the chain stopped there. But, if it has no cause, then—according to Avicenna—it is, by definition, a necessary being.

We might liken this to a chain. Each of the links in the chain represents a contingent being. Imagine that the chain is hanging, suspended in mid-air. Such a chain simply cannot hang from NOTHING. It needs an anchor, or a “hook” so to speak, to hang from. That first link, or hook, cannot ITSELF be a contingent being—or else IT TOO would need something to anchor it. So, it must be a necessary being (i.e., one which requires no cause because it contains an explanation for its own existence within itself).

(b) Alternatively, the series of causes goes back and back forever and ever, without beginning. Now, since every member of the series has a cause before it, it follows that every member of the series is a contingent being. But, then, the WHOLE SERIES is itself a contingent being—for, Avicenna says that, if all of the parts of a thing are contingent, then the whole made up of those parts must also be contingent. It follows that the entire infinite series must have a cause that is external to it. Obviously, this cause cannot be a contingent being too—for then, it must also have a cause, and we are back to square one. The cause, then, must eventually terminate in a necessary being. Like this:

In short, the series of contingent causes—whether finite or infinite—entails the existence of a necessary being. And this necessary being is what we call God. A paraphrased version of Avicenna’s argument might look like this:
1. Everything that exists is either contingent (i.e., requiring an external cause for its existence) or necessary (i.e., not requiring an external cause for its existence, since its essence by itself entails its existence).
2. A set of contingent beings is itself contingent (since, if all of a thing’s parts are contingent, then the whole is contingent).
3. Therefore, a necessary being exists (since the set of all existing things cannot ALL be contingent, for in that case the set itself would still require an external cause; i.e., a cause that is not contingent; i.e., a cause that is necessary). And this is God.

7. Objections: Is Avicenna’s argument successful? A couple of objections:

(a) Against the Conclusion: The Necessary Existent is Not God: Even if Avicenna’s argument is successful, all that he has proved is that there is a “Necessarily Existent” which caused the existence of the contingent universe. But, does this get us the God of Islam? Must such a being be a PERSONAL god, morally perfect, and so on?

Reply: Avicenna’s argument does not get us God in the traditional Western monotheist sense. However, he DOES argue for the other divine attributes separately. We’ll look at these sorts of additions when we study Thomas Aquinas next week.

(b) Against P1: Uncaused Contingent Beings: Maybe some contingent beings DON’T require a cause. In fact, some experiments in quantum physics seem to suggest that this is actually the case. This is not an incoherent position. The idea of something popping into existence with no cause at all seems coherent enough. I can imagine it happening without imagining anything that is a contradiction. If that’s right, then perhaps the universe doesn’t NEED a cause, even if it IS a contingent being. Maybe it’s just here, with no explanation whatsoever. *(Avicenna would say that this is incoherent. Is he right?)*

(c) Against P2: The Whole is Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts: One of Avicenna’s crucial claims is that, *If all of a thing’s parts are contingent, then the whole is also contingent.* But, is this true?

*[We seem to have reason to doubt this. For, collections often have attributes that their individual members do NOT have. For instance, the collection of all sentient beings is not sentient; the set of all numbers is not itself a number; and so on. So, perhaps the set of all contingent things is NOT contingent?]*

Some object that, to provide an explanation for every PART of a set of things JUST IS to provide an explanation for the WHOLE set. For instance, if I have a collection of 5 keys, and I gave you a complete explanation of the causes and reasons of EACH individual
key, it would be rather odd to then ask, “But, what is the explanation for the whole five?” For, the explanation for the whole JUST IS the 5 explanations for all of the individual parts. But, now consider the infinite series of causes: Every member of that infinite series of beings DOES have an explanation; namely, the prior cause. That is, for every individual in the series, the one before it explains its existence. If every PART of the series has an explanation, then it seems to follow that the whole requires no FURTHER explanation.

If that is correct, then perhaps the entire SET of contingent beings can itself be necessary, even though all of its members are contingent. In short, sometimes the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Reply: Avicenna would say that this is absurd. For instance, he writes,

If ... the totality exists necessarily through itself, but each one of its members is something possible, then what exists necessarily subsists by means of things that exist possibly, which is absurd.

It seems the present objection confuses two similar, but importantly different claims:

- The existence of every contingent being (individually) is explained.
- The existence of all contingent beings (as a totality) is explained.

It is NOT the case that an explanation for every member of some group constitutes an explanation for the group itself. Consider the keychain example. Even if I give the explanation for all five of the keys on the chain, it actually DOES make sense to then ask, “But, why are there any keys at all?” And the answer would be something that is not itself a key: Namely, it would be US—we human beings, and our desire to protect certain belongings, are the explanation for why there are any keys at all.

Furthermore, notice that we must go OUTSIDE of the set of keys in order to explain why there are any keys at all. So too, we must also go outside of the set of contingent beings in order to explain why there are any contingent beings at all. And this is true EVEN IF the set of contingent beings is infinite, extending forever back into the past, such that no member of the series is left without a cause for its existence.

[An excellent video of Leibniz’s cosmological argument—which is an almost exact rip-off of Avicenna’s—can be found here.]