

WHY DOES KIERKEGAARD SAY THAT THE NECESSARY IS NOT POSSIBLE?

In what reads like an embarrassing falsity, Kierkegaard, in his *Philosophical Fragments*, says that the ‘possible cannot be predicated of the necessary’.¹ It’s curious that so few commentators have attended to this statement.² Perhaps their refraining to explain it is out of embarrassment or confusion. With some effort I think we can process what Kierkegaard means if we focus on the immediate context of his remark. His statement emerges out of a discussion about the nature of and problems associated with what he calls ‘the change of coming into existence.’ Kierkegaard defines the change of coming into existence as a ‘transition from possibility to actuality.’³ Throughout, Kierkegaard presses on the more or less uncontroversial point that *any* change is contingent and not *absolutely* necessary (as opposed to causally or naturally necessary). I suggest in this paper that Kierkegaard’s view about the contingency of change drives the initially embarrassing remark that the necessary is not possible.

The kind of necessity Kierkegaard claims is not possible is the absolutely necessary.⁴ Kierkegaard has a fairly ordinary understanding of absolute necessity. By saying that the change of coming into existence does not happen necessarily, he highlights the widely accepted philosophical position (at least among contemporary philosophers) that historical (including

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) 75. Henceforth *PF*.

² In his commentary on *Philosophical Fragments*, C. Stephen Evans devotes just a short paragraph to it, but he doesn’t attempt to interpret what Kierkegaard might mean by it. Instead, he repeats the fact that Kierkegaard’s view about possibility conflicts both with Aristotle’s thoughts about the matter and good sense in general. In other words, Evans merely recognizes Kierkegaard’s mistake and moves on. See *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard’s Philosophical Fragments* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 122.

³ *PF*, 74.

⁴ As he explicates the notion of the necessary, it is evident that he does not have anything like natural or causal necessity in mind. Based on what he says, it may not be far off the mark to say that what Kierkegaard has in mind with the term ‘necessity’ is something like what Plantinga calls ‘broadly logical necessity.’ See Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 1-8 (Henceforth Plantinga). This is because, while absolute necessity includes rules of first-order logic, and thus *modus ponens*, it is something much *broader* than ‘strict logical necessity.’ It also includes geometrical and mathematical truths, and based on what Kierkegaard says elsewhere, God’s existence.

natural) events are not logically necessary. However, this doesn't tell us much about the nature of absolute necessity. Unlike other kinds of necessity (for example, natural necessity) the absolutely necessary is exclusive of (but does not by definition obviate) contingency. According to Kierkegaard the distinctive mark of the absolutely necessary is that it is eternal and changeless; he contrasts the absolutely necessary with the contingency of change, defined as the transition from possibility to actuality.

The following remarks made by Kierkegaard about necessity and the contingency of change are instructive at this point: (1) 'Nothing whatever exists [*er til*] because it is necessary, but the necessary exists because it is necessary or because the necessary is.'⁵ (2) 'Coming into existence is a change, but since the necessary is always related to itself and is related to itself in the same way, it cannot be changed at all.'⁶ Finally, (3) 'Everything that has come into existence is *eo ipso* historical, for even if no further historical predicate can be applied to it, the crucial predicate of the historical can still be predicated—namely, that it has come into existence.'⁷ The distinction between the change of coming into existence and what is absolutely necessary is marked most forcefully by the wedge Kierkegaard inserts between the timelessness of the necessary and the historical character of what comes into existence. For Kierkegaard, then, whatever exists *and* is timeless is necessary. There was no time in which what it (the necessary) could have failed or not failed to come into existence, since it does not come into existence. It just (as he says) *is*.

In spite of the strange use of his modal notions, these passages reveal Kierkegaard's penchant for thinking that something is absolutely necessary if and only if it cannot fail to be

⁵ *PF*, 75.

⁶ *PF*, 74.

⁷ *PF*, 75.

actual. More formally, the passages suggest that X is absolutely necessary if and only if X's being actual is X's only possibility. It follows from this that, for Kierkegaard, whatever is absolutely necessary could not have come into existence, because the *only* possible state of affairs for something that is absolutely necessary is an *actual* state of affairs.

So far so good. However, at this juncture Kierkegaard's view appears to waver. He says that '[t]he actual is no more necessary than the possible, for the necessary is absolutely different from both.'⁸ Here Kierkegaard sharply divides the necessary from both the possible and the actual. One can't help but ask: If what is necessary isn't possible or actual, then what is it? Has Kierkegaard contradicted himself, saying both that the necessary is and that the necessary is neither possible nor actual? If what is necessary is not possible, then it is impossible; if it is impossible then it is neither necessary nor could it exist⁹; if it is not actual, then even if it were possible, it would not exist. But Kierkegaard says that the necessary is something that cannot fail to exist. It doesn't come into existence and it doesn't go out of existence, it simply is.

We may be able to sidestep these problems with a simple reading of this passage. Kierkegaard in fact is not stating that the necessary is neither possible nor actual. Rather, perhaps he means that the possible and the actual in the sense in which he has defined them for his purposes of explaining change are not necessary. That is, if he uses the term 'possible' to mean that which both may be and may fail to be actual, then he is right that the possible is not necessary, since the necessary is something that cannot fail to be. Furthermore, if by the term 'actual' he means that which has come into existence, has a past, and is present, then it too is not necessary given how he defines it. This lends insight to Kierkegaard's odd remark that '[t]he

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ This is why Aristotle held that the necessary is possible. As Kierkegaard was aware (see *PF*, p. 75), Aristotle (in *On Interpretation* 21b-23; also see *PF*, 299 fn 13) argued that there are different senses of the possible—that which is not impossible and that which may or may not be actual.

change of coming into existence is actuality.’ For this reason, he continues, ‘[n]o coming into existence is necessary—not before it came into existence, for then it cannot come into existence, and not after it has come into existence, for then it has not come into existence.’¹⁰ On a first look, then, this seems to work. The possible and the actual, *as such*, are not necessary. Indeed, there are many possibilities that are not absolutely necessary. For example, my sitting at a café writing this right now is not, by most lights, absolutely necessary. Perhaps, then, Kierkegaard is not after all stating that the necessary is neither possible nor actual. Instead he may just be pointing out what logically follows from the manner he has employed these notions in his definition of change.

While he is right that the possible and the actual are not necessary as such, he turns around and asserts that ‘the possible cannot be predicated of the necessary.’¹¹ Now we’re back to square one, and the previous problems re-emerge. There is one sense, just discussed in the foregoing, in which the ‘possible’ cannot be said of the necessary. Recall that the necessary is that which cannot fail to be. It doesn’t come into existence nor does it go out of existence, whereas the possible is that which either may be or may fail to be. It’s false, then, to say that the necessary is possible *in this sense*.

Kierkegaard’s problem remains. The root of it comes down to his refusing to consider *different senses* of the possible. This unwillingness motivates his critique of Aristotle, who holds ‘the thesis that everything necessary is possible.’ Kierkegaard remarks that Aristotle ‘makes shift of formulating two kinds of the possible instead of discovering’ that the possible cannot be said

¹⁰ *PF*, 75.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

of the necessary.¹² I believe some reasonable interpretive headway can be made here. So, while Kierkegaard may very well be making a drastic mistake, his view may at least be coherent.

First, the Aristotelian doctrine of the different senses of possibility that Kierkegaard finds problematic is based on the distinction between the impossible and the possible. Something that is impossible is that which cannot be. Thus, there are no impossible states of affairs. There are two helpful ways to think of impossibility that is relevant to this discussion. There are (1) absolute impossibilities and (2) natural or physical impossibilities.¹³ Something that is absolutely impossible is, quite simply, that which *by definition* cannot be made actual. For example, my squaring a circle and my adding 2 and 2 to make 5 are absolutely impossible. However, natural or physical impossibilities are not absolutely impossible. Thus, natural impossibilities are *not* by definition impossible. Rather, given some set of antecedent conditions and causes along with the laws of nature, some things are physically impossible for us to do. Like cows, I cannot jump over the moon, and unlike Superman I cannot run faster than a speeding bullet. Why not call these amazing physical feats absolutely impossible? The simple answer is we can imagine them to be possible, as far fetched as that sounds, while we can't do this with squaring circles. The coming into existence of the world and the laws of nature that govern the world could have been different even though the actual laws of nature prevent such activities. The absolutely impossible, then, is the stronger form of impossibility than the naturally impossible. This is because the naturally impossible is so contingently, whereas the absolutely impossible is impossible by definition.

¹² *PF*, 75.

¹³ My discussion of the two senses of impossibility is drawn from Plantinga, pp., 10-15.

As we might have expected, the opposite of the impossible is the possible. The possible, as we have already seen it employed, is something that *can* be. This is the general way Kierkegaard employs the notion of possibility. For something to become actual it must *be able* to be actual. While I can't jump over the moon, I can get on a spaceship and fly there (although, right now, that might be very difficult). For now let us consider, as Aristotle did, two broad senses of possibility: (1) the contingent and (2) the absolutely necessary. These are two ways of being possible because what is contingent and what is absolutely necessary both *can be* actual. The contingent is distinguished from the absolutely necessary in that it may fail to be, whereas the absolutely necessary cannot fail to be.

The contingent is what both may be or may fail to be. My writing this right now at the café is possible in this sense. I'm here, so I *can* be here, and yet, equally, I could have failed to be here. I could have been at the office with a student or have been caught in traffic. This sense of the possible as what *both* may be *and* may fail to be captures what Kierkegaard primarily means by the possible. This is the possible *as* contingent, which is categorically different from the absolutely necessary.

From his remarks, then, we see that Kierkegaard sharply distinguishes between the contingent and the absolutely necessary, but he does not follow Aristotle by attributing a different sense of possibility to the absolutely necessary. From the Aristotelian point of view, both the contingent and the absolutely necessary are not impossible: things, events, propositions, states of affairs, etc. that are one or the other of these *can be*. In other words, quite simply what is possible is not impossible. But we see, again, the apparent mistake Kierkegaard has made by not allowing the possible to be predicated of the absolutely necessary: since something is either possible or impossible, it follows that the absolutely necessary is impossible

Would Kierkegaard be willing to say that the necessary is impossible? My hunch is that he wouldn't be willing to do so. So, for what it's worth, he simply cannot mean this, and so he must be employing possibility in a very specific way that excludes any notion of absolute necessity. That is, he must mean that the *sub-genus* of possibility—the contingent—cannot be predicated of the absolutely necessary. We ought to extend a charitable hand to Kierkegaard, and I think he would reach for it. If we keep in mind his division between the absolutely necessary and the contingency of change, a coherent picture of what he's saying about how necessity and possibility are related appears. Let's look at what he says.

The context of these passages pinpoints Kierkegaard's distinction between the absolutely necessary and the possible and actual as terms that define the nature of change. For Kierkegaard, change is a transition from possibility to actuality, 'from not existing to existing.'¹⁴ Furthermore, he thinks of the possible and the actual in a fairly Aristotelian way: '[t]he possible is a being that is nevertheless non-being, and a being that is indeed being is actual being.'¹⁵ Change is from something being in a state of non-being to an actual state of being. For example, one kind of change may involve God's actualizing an idea, say the idea of a series of natural events. The series of events exist in the mind of God, but the ideal series' mode of being is as a non-being. God's realization of the idea brings it into actuality.

The definition of change as the transition from something being possible to its being actual is further outlined with a key remark: change 'is not in essence [*Væsen*] but in being [*Væren*].'¹⁶ In other words, changes are events in or of *existence* and not in some realm of *essences*. Thus, change is from one mode of existence (not existing) to another mode of

¹⁴ *PF*, 73.

¹⁵ *PF*, 74.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

existence (existing) of a *single* thing; not from one *kind* of thing to a different *kind* of thing. Take, again, the change of some possible series of events that exists in God's mind. The change is from a possible series to an actual series. The possible series, say the one that contains me writing this at a café right now has been put into actuality. However, this change from possible series to actual series is the change of the existence of one and the same series in God's mind. That is, by becoming actual the possible series is not 'intrinsically changed.'¹⁷ The content of the idea in God's mind remains the same through its coming into existence. Otherwise, it wouldn't be the particular idea in God's mind in question, but another idea that comes into existence.¹⁸ As Kierkegaard suggests, then, what is possible does not become something *absolutely* different from itself when it is actualized, but rather becomes something *relatively* different in that its *mode of existence* is changed. Change, in other words, is the transition from one mode of existence of something (not-existing) to another mode of existence (actually existing) the same thing. This is why, then, Kierkegaard argues that change is *of the existence* or *being* of a thing.

On the other hand, what is Kierkegaard ruling out by saying that the change of coming into existence is not in essence? I think he means that change is not something that occurs among, in, or between 'essences' like 'redness,' 'horseness,' 'humanness,' or 'triangleness,' etc. The essence of red does not become more or less red than it is. A perfect right triangle cannot become a triangle with an 89.9999° degree angle, nor does it become a square. Change in the first way would be a privation (a loss of perfection) of the essence in question, whereas change in the second way would involve a transition *from one kind of thing to another kind of thing*, from

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

one essence to another. The realm of essences is unchanging. Possibilities whose mode of being is non-being, on the other hand, can change; they can become actual.

In addition, then, to the possible being something that may equally be or fail to be, the mode of existence of the possible is also 'non-being' or 'not-existing.' For this one reason it is strange to say that the necessary can be predicated of the possible. How can the absolutely necessary, something that cannot fail to be, also be in some sense a non-being? This is a self-contradiction. So, on this one score, Kierkegaard is right: the necessary is not possible. It remains controversial, however, that he refuses to expand the notion of the possible to include that which is not impossible, as Aristotle did.

This adumbration of absolute necessity narrows the scope of the kinds of necessity Kierkegaard juxtaposes with the historical and contingent change of coming into existence. What is immediately clear is that the features he ascribes to necessity here are not the same as those shared by physical or natural necessity.¹⁹ The absolutely necessary is that which cannot fail to be, whereas what is possible can equally be or fail to be actual. There is, then, for Kierkegaard, a deep rift between absolute necessity and the possible and the actual. However, the same is not the case with natural necessity. As I argued, one significant difference between absolute necessity and necessity in nature is that we can not only imagine the laws of nature that govern the universe to be different, but it is also possible that the actual series of events governed by actual laws of nature could have been different.²⁰ But this is not true of the absolutely necessary, as the absolutely necessary cannot fail to be actual. The transition from its being possible to its

¹⁹ For a helpful analysis of the relevant differences between natural and absolute necessity, see Earl Conee and Theodore Sider, *Riddles of Existence: a Guided Tour of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 181-196. Henceforth *Riddles*

²⁰ *Riddles*, 190.

being actual is impossible, as this would result in the self-contradiction that at some time what is absolutely necessary wasn't absolutely necessary.

His argument for the changelessness of the absolutely necessary further illuminates its relation to essences. He says, '[n]ecessity...pertains to essence and in such a way that the qualification of essence specifically excludes coming into existence.'²¹ As we saw Kierkegaard argue, essences don't come into existence, and nor do they change from what they are to something different. Now, Kierkegaard doesn't reveal what exactly these necessary essences are, but his argument for the separation of absolute necessity and the contingent character of change does not require his doing so. It is enough for him to highlight the difference between the changelessness of necessary ideas and the contingency of change.²²

So what motivates Kierkegaard's insistence that the necessary is not possible is his stance on the definition of change as a transition from possibility to actuality. Kierkegaard runs into trouble when he refuses to think, as Aristotle did, of two senses of possibility. While he is, I think, wrong to not expand his view of possibility to include that which is not impossible, the claim, nonetheless, coheres with his driving concern to sharply distinguish the absolutely necessary from contingency.

²¹ *PF*, 86.

²² In addition to ascribing absolute necessity to broad metaphysical concepts, Kierkegaard might be willing to add to the list of the absolutely necessary strictly logical and self-evident propositions (bachelors are unmarried men, a thing is either green or non-green), logical rules of inference (e.g. modus ponens), geometrical theorems (like Pythagoras's), numerical properties and their relations (that the number 10 is larger than the number 5, or that the number 10 is necessarily a prime number, for example), and the existence of God (for example, that God is a necessary being).