INTRODUCTION

CONTINGENCY AND RELIGION—A PHILOSOPHICAL TOUR D’HORIZON

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This volume focuses on the problem of religion and contingency in its various aspects. However, the notion of contingency is a difficult one. Its meaning is extremely complex and we will see below that different authors use it in differentfashions.

In this introduction, I will focus on this notion. In particular, I will provide a conceptual roadmap for dealing with it. Thus, the purpose of this introduction goes well beyond summarizing the contributions to this book. I will attempt to tidy-up the use of the notion of contingency by making a distinction between its use in classical philosophy and in modern philosophy. This distinction serves as a classificatory scheme according to which the different uses of the notion by the different authors of this anthology can be grouped. However, I do not mean to provide an exhaustive analysis of this notion nor a detailed historical account of its development.2

In Part I of this introduction, I address classical philosophy’s dealings with contingency. By classical philosophy, I mean the mainstream philosophy from ancient Greece up to the Continental Enlightenment, most notably, Kant and its heirs. Classical philosophy’s characteristic way of dealing with contingency is to avoid it. It attempts to replace contingency by necessity wherever possible.

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1 I thank Peter Jonkers for the helpful discussions we had on the subject and, above all, for his very valuable comments on earlier drafts of this introduction.

2 In a discussion of this introduction at the conference on Religion and Contingency in Hoeven, The Netherlands, December 4–5, 2006, Vincent Brümmer, Ingolf Dalferth and Marcel Sarot suggested in various ways that the notion of contingency is more complex than the way it is outlined here. I acknowledge this, but would like to point to the purpose of this introduction: far from being an exhaustive account of the notion of contingency, it is meant to help situate the different uses of this notion presupposed by the different authors of this volume. To this end, it is helpful to draw the (admittedly rather crude) distinction between the use of contingency in classical philosophy and in modern philosophy (see below).
To be more precise, we should distinguish between classical philosophy in its earlier and later stages. In its earlier stages, say, in Greek philosophy, attempts to replace contingency by necessity dominate. Yet, in its later stages, say, from the time of the German Enlightenment onwards, the way of dealing with the notion of contingency changes somewhat: attempts to replace it by necessity are given up and contingency is tolerated to a limited extent. Yet, what are considered to be its most dangerous consequences are neutralized, for example, by embedding contingency in a transcendentalist framework (see below, section 3).

In Part II of this introduction, I take a look at modern philosophy’s dealings with contingency. By *modern philosophy*, I mean the philosophical tradition from the Anglo-American Enlightenment up to the present, including certain branches of the Continental tradition. Its basic way of dealing with contingency is to accept it in principle. It is only *after* having accepted it in principle that modern philosophy ponders on how to deal with it constructively.

“Dealing with it constructively” can take on different forms, ranging from accepting it “as is,” say, in empiricism (Hume), via the attempt to yield to it without buying into it all the way (e.g. Hilary Putnam), to embracing it emphatically (as in the thought of Richard Rorty and many postmodernists).

To give a brief outline of this introduction, Part I is made up of three sections: In section 1, I provide some general characteristics of the term contingency as it is used in classical philosophy. In section 2, I consider its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, particularly the theological consequences of the distinction between *doxa* and *episteme* in Greek philosophy. In section 3, I move on via Leibniz to the German Enlightenment (Kant and Lessing).

Part II is made up of five sections: In section 4, I provide some general characteristics of the use of contingency in modern philosophy and contrast this with its use in classical philosophy. In section 5, I deal with examples of the Continental philosophical tradition which are not committed to the classical philosophical impulse to hold contingency at bay (Heidegger and Jaspers). In section 6, I summarize some of the contributions to this volume which approach the issue of contingency from a systematic-philosophical viewpoint. In section 7, I delve into Anglo-American philosophy. I deal with traditional philosophy of science