

A Defense of the Ontological Argument

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“That thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.”¹ From this simple observation Saint Anselm believed God’s existence could be demonstrated. Many philosophers have demurred, even those, like Descartes, who had ontological arguments² of their own: “But although, in reality, I might not be able to conceive of a God without existence, no more than of a mountain without a valley, nevertheless, as from the simple fact that I conceive a mountain with a valley, it does not follow that there exists any mountain in the world, so likewise, although I conceive God as existent, it does not follow, it seems, from that, that God exists, for my thought does not impose any necessity on things.”³ As I say, Descartes went on to offer his own ontological argument⁴ which he represents as quite original, though it seems to me merely an adaptation of Anselm’s argument. Leibniz observes: “what Descartes has borrowed from Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, is very beautiful and really very ingenious, but there is still a gap therein to be filled. This celebrated archbishop, who was without doubt one of the most able men of his time, congratulates himself, not without reason, for having discovered a means of proving the existence of God *a priori*.”⁵ So Leibniz believes that Saint Anselm had indeed

¹ Saint Anselm, Proslogion, Chapter II. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anselm/basic_works.ii.ii.iv.html

² By an ontological argument I understand an argument to the existence of God from premises which are entirely a priori and at least one of which adverts to the definition of “God” or God’s essence.

³ *The Philosophy of Descartes in Extracts from His Writings*. H. A. P. Torrey. New York, 1982. p. 161f. Cited at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anselm/basic_works.ii.ii.iv.html.

⁴ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Third and Fifth Meditations.

⁵ *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*. Translated by A.G. Langley, cited in Alvin Plantinga, *The Ontological Argument from Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers* (Anchor Books, 1965), p. 54.

discovered⁶ an a priori proof of God's existence, but what is the "gap"? "It is an imperfect demonstration, which assumes something that must still be proved in order to render it mathematically evident; that is, it is tacitly assumed that this idea of the all-great or all-perfect being is possible, and implies no contradiction. And it is already something that by this remark it is proved that, *assuming that God is Possible, he exists*, which is the privilege of divinity alone."⁷

To see how it is reasonable to think the argument has a gap in this way, consider the succinct summary of the argument in Chapter III of the *Proslogion*.⁸

it assuredly exists so truly, that it cannot be conceived not to exist. For, it is possible to conceive of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist; and this is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, can be conceived not to exist, it is not that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this is an irreconcilable contradiction.

Here is my interpretation of the argument contained in this passage. It is clearly a reductio ad absurdum argument.

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|---|------------------------|
| 1. God can be conceived not to exist | Suppose for reductio |
| 2. God is that than which no greater can be conceived. | Definition, Chapter II |
| 3. It is possible to conceive of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist. | |
| 4. $\forall x([(x \text{ can be conceived not to exist}) \wedge (\exists y(y \text{ cannot be conceived not to exist}))] \rightarrow [\exists y(y > x)])$ | |
| 5. God cannot be conceived not to exist. | 1,2,3,4 |

The supposition that God can be conceived not to exist leads to a contradiction, so we may conclude that God's existence is inconceivable. It is reasonable to interpret this as establishing

⁶ He didn't exactly discover it, since there is an ontological argument in Augustine (*On Free Choice of the Will*, Bk. III), but he clearly introduced it into the literature with an emphasis that made it a more serious topic of discussion.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ It is fairly common to hear the sentiment that the argument of Chapter III is an *additional* argument, extending the conclusion of Chapter II (see, for example, Hartshorne 1962, p. 50 and "The Necessarily Existent," in Plantinga 1965), and William Rowe "Modal Versions of the Ontological Argument," in Pojman 1987). I think this is isogesis rather than exegesis, but I will not argue that point here beyond saying that it seems more reasonable in light of the actual textual evidence to attribute to Anselm some imprecision as to what the argument actually was, than to attribute extreme precision with respect to conceptual distinctions required by the two-argument thesis. On my view, the so-called "second argument" is an admissible precisification of a somewhat vague argument presented by the historical Anselm. For more see Robert Adams "The Logical Structure of Anselm's Arguments," in *The Virtue of Faith* (OUP, 1980), pp. 236-237.

only something about the *idea* of God: that if it is exemplified, it is exemplified necessarily. A dodecagon cannot be conceived not to have twelve sides. So *if* there are dodecagons, they *necessarily* have twelve sides. Likewise, since God cannot be conceived not to exist, it follows that *if* He exists, he exists *necessarily*. But if this is correct, then if it is even possible that God exists, he actually exists.

As far as I am aware Charles Hartshorne was the first to make good on Leibniz' diagnosis of Anselm's argument.⁹ That is, he shows rigorously that the existence of God—construed as a metaphysically necessary being—follows from the mere possibility of His existence. I will now present my own version of the modal argument, which resembles that of Adams 1987.¹⁰

I begin by proving a rule of inference which is validity-preserving in axiomatic S5¹¹.

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|---|--|
| 1. $p \rightarrow \Box p$ | Assumption |
| 2. $\sim \Box p \rightarrow \sim p$ | from 1 by contraposition |
| 3. $\Diamond \sim p \rightarrow \sim p$ | from 2 by the dual rule |
| 4. $\Diamond \sim \sim p \rightarrow \sim \sim p$ | from 3 substituting $\sim p$ for p schematically |
| 5. $\Diamond p \rightarrow p$ | from 4 by double negation |

$\therefore p \rightarrow \Box p \vdash \Diamond p \rightarrow p$

Call this modal inference rule MIR. Now the ontological argument can be stated very succinctly taking 'G' to represent *God exists*¹².

⁹ See his *Man's Vision of God* (1941) and "The Necessarily Existent" in Plantinga 1965, and *The Logic of Perfection* (1962), esp. 50-51, and *Anselm's Discovery* (1965). Leibniz' own attempts are quite speculative and not formally presented. See Plantinga 1962, 55-56.

¹⁰ Adams presents two versions, one on pp. 232-233 which is unnecessarily complicated and one on p. 236 which, though very simple and as short as mine, I find less illuminating. However, given what he says on p. 235, my argument is a token of the same type as his.

¹¹ I will not defend the propriety of S5 here. For arguments see Adams 1987, pp. 234-235 and Leftow 1991, pp. 6-16, esp. 13-14.

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|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. $G \rightarrow \Box G$ | Definition of God as necessary being |
| 2. $\Diamond G \rightarrow G$ | 1 via MIR |
| 3. $\Diamond G$ | Premise |
| 4. G | 2,3 MP |

So we move from the definition of God¹³ through His possibly existing to his actually existing. Obviously, the only really vulnerable point is the only substantive premise “ $\Diamond G$ ” which I’ll call the Possibility Premise or PP for short. Leibniz tried to defend PP and thus fill the gap¹⁴ in Anselm’s argument via a consideration of the nature of perfections.¹⁵ His argument is abstruse and I will not investigate it. However, he also thought that this premise had the benefit of the doubt.

We have the right to presume the possibility of every being, and especially that of God, until some one proves the contrary. So that this metaphysical argument already gives a morally demonstrative conclusion, which declares that according to the present state of our knowledge we must judge that God exists, and act in conformity thereto.¹⁶

I will refer to this as the Benefit of the Doubt or BOD defense of Anselm. The BOD defense has an intuitive plausibility to it. Do you believe there are aliens living under the surface of the Earth? Presumably not, but it’s possible. Do you think I’m watching you now through a tiny closed-circuit camera embedded in your computer screen? Presumably not, but it’s possible. The burden of proof generally works this way. For any state of affairs, we assume that it does

¹² Fortunately, the literature has gotten quite beyond the old Kantian saw that “existence is not a predicate” See Plantinga *God and Other Minds* (1962), Chapter 2. For the last great argument to the contrary view see Alston 1960. Still, for those who can’t let go ‘G’ could be read as *The idea of God is realized* or some such thing.

¹³ I wish to be more explicit than Adams about how this is functioning. I am treating the definition of God as an axiom. It is commonplace to introduce definitions as axioms in probability theory and the axiomatization of scientific theories. The argument could be run without using the definition this way, but I find it more theoretically satisfying. Hartshorne (1962, p. 51) uses a syntactically isomorphic premise and calls it “Anselm’s Principle” that perfection could not exist contingently. I think this is fine, but less direct than the definitional approach.

¹⁴ It should be noted that this is where many Thomists have pointed out a gap needing filling.

¹⁵ *Op. Cit.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

not obtain, but that it is possible. If someone were to assert that there were aliens living under the surface of the Earth, the right thing to say would be, “Where’s your evidence?” He bears the burden of proof. However, if someone merely asserted that it was *possible* that there were, in this case he gets the benefit of the doubt. In general:

Actuality bears the burden of proof.

Possibility gets the benefit of the doubt.

If someone said that it was *impossible* that there were aliens living under the surface of the Earth, we should tell him to give his evidence, to demonstrate the impossibility. According to this line of thought PP gets the benefit of the doubt and it is rational to accept it unless there is good reason not to do so. It is important to note this point is distinct from but related to the issue of whether conceivability entails possibility.¹⁷ For even if one granted the procedural point about the burden of proof, one still has to consider whether G is possible.¹⁸ Before treating this issue further, I want to note a problem¹⁹ that must be kept in mind during discussion of that issue. It involves an objection which notes that the ontological argument can be “run in reverse.”

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|----|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 5. | $G \rightarrow \Box G$ | Definition of God as necessary being |
| 6. | $\neg \Box G \rightarrow \neg G$ | 5, contraposition |
| 7. | $\Diamond \neg G \rightarrow \neg G$ | 6, dual rule |
| 8. | $\Diamond \neg G$ | Premise |

¹⁷ There are those who maintain that conceivability does entail possibility, but that apparent conceivability does not entail conceivability. I will not sift the matter to that fine a granularity. Also, there are disputes about whether, when one denies someone’s conceivability claim, the denier owes the claimant an explanation about how they are mistaken. Andrew Melnyk communicated in conversation that he reads Kripke as suggesting that.

¹⁸ Lewis 1970 says when presenting and critically evaluating a modal version of Anselm’s ontological argument that “In the context at hand, the appropriate sense of possibility is conceivability” but here is considering how to think of the array of possible worlds to interpret the modalities in question. The connection between that and the issue of the relationship between conceivability and possibility is a complicated matter that I won’t treat here.

¹⁹ I discovered that this point was put very similarly by Adams 1988, p. 21.

9. $\neg G$

7,8 MP

This atheological ontological argument seems to be on equal footing with regard to the justification of its main premise that possibly, God does not exist. Call that premise the Atheological Premise AP. Call the fact that both theological and atheological arguments proceed from the possibility of their conclusions the Symmetry Problem. Adams 1988 argues that this problem makes the BOD defense unfruitful: “when we have two propositions of which we know that exactly one is possibly true, but we have not proved which one it is, the general rule of presuming propositions possibly true yields no consistent conclusion” (p. 21). Note that Adams does not dispute the presumption principles *per se*. He only suggests that in certain special circumstances—circumstances in which we find the ontological argument—it does not apply. This is a reasonable thing to say, but I want to suggest an asymmetry which could break the deadlock of the Symmetry Problem.

Recall the issue adverted to earlier: that of whether conceivability entails possibility. My own view is that the non-existence of God is not conceivable, but I don’t wish to argue that here. I do think the non-existence of God *seems* conceivable and if it is then the Symmetry Problem shows that that does not entail possibility, for contradictories seem conceivable. However, I do think that conceivability is defeasible evidence for possibility. That is, if something is conceivable then unless we have reason to think it is impossible, we should conclude it is possible but, this judgment could be overturned by further investigation. I will now present the Asymmetry Argument in defense of the possibility of God’s existence. Its main premise is the following intuitive principle which I call the Conceivability Principle.

CP For any sentence S and agent A, if A can conceive $\neg S$, then A can conceive S.²⁰

²⁰ S is restricted to sentences which are strictly logically consistent, i.e. entails a contradiction. The foe of a CP-based ontological argument would have the option of arguing that the concept of God is strictly logically

The strategy should be obvious: the opponent of the ontological argument clearly wants $\neg G$ to be conceivable in support of the main premise ' $\diamond\neg G$ ' of the atheological ontological argument. However, CP entails that if that is the case then $\diamond G$ has prima facie support. Once that is recognized, then we have reason to believe $\Box G$ and thus $\neg\diamond\neg G$ which defeats the prima facie justification of $\diamond\neg G$. I think this asymmetry gives more than a merely procedural advantage to the ontological argument. One of two apparently conceivable things *must* be impossible. The logic of modality tells us that. And even though conceivability and possibility must come apart in some cases—the Symmetry Problem shows that—there is an intuitive connection between them. If CP is correct then G must be conceivable. We are not just *assuming* it's possible, we've got an *argument* that it's possible.

The only way to undercut the argument would be to sever the natural—though contingent—connection between conceivability and possibility. I find that counterintuitive enough that I will instead pursue the possibility of rebutting PP directly. The first attempt I want to consider comes from William Rowe²¹ which I will call the Extraordinary Property Argument.²² Rowe thinks there are considerations which bear unfavorably upon the conceivability of a necessary being. He says “its satisfaction in *any* possible world depends on what is contained in *every* possible world” (71). He contrasts the property of necessary existence²³ unfavorably in this respect with “such pedestrian properties as being an elephant or

incoherent. Of course, if one thought they already had such an argument, the demonstrative failure of the ontological argument would just be icing on the cake. There remains the issue of the status of CP when the value of S is a sentence expressing a broadly logically impossible proposition. However, in the present context it would be a dialectical infelicity to argue against the applicability of CP to God on this basis.

²¹ Rowe 1987.

²² His argument is similar to an objection anticipated by Plantinga 1974, p. 218.

²³ Rowe is actually considering Plantinga's argument in Plantinga 1974 Chapter X specifically, so he's considering the more robust property of maximal greatness, but that doesn't matter here. Also, by necessary existence I

being a unicorn,” for “The question of whether these two properties are instantiated in some possible but nonactual world w doesn’t at all depend on whether the actual world contains elephants or unicorns.” The idea seems to be that the property of necessary existence is somehow a “riskier” property. It says things about what happens in every world, not just in some world or other. Liken this to the property *scope* of a scientific theory. In general, the broader the scope of a theory, the less likely it is a priori to be true, for there are more ways it could go wrong.²⁴ Rowe continues in a fashion that leads me to believe this is basically what he has in mind:

Plantinga’s property of being maximally great [which entails necessary existence] can be instantiated in some possible world w only if the actual world contains [God]. And even this is not enough. Not only must the actual world contain [a necessary] being, but *every* possible world must contain a being having these marvelous attributes...Once we understand all this, we can see what an extraordinary property it is to which Plantinga has drawn our attention. (Rowe 1987, 71, emphasis in original)

Rowe is intent on emphasizing that the instantiation of the property of necessary existence has far-ranging modal implications. But how does the atheological premise fare? Rowe contrasts it favorably with necessary existence: “The instantiation of Plantinga’s extraordinary property in a possible world w is dependent on what *every* other possible world contains...The instantiation in w of the property of being in less than perfect company requires only that each person *in* w have some flaw, however slight.” (71-72). So it does seem that Rowe is intent to emphasize PP as making a universal claim and as AP as making only an existential claim. This is, of course, technically the opposite of the truth. Interpreting the modal operators as quantifiers over possible worlds, PP says

(PP) $\exists w(G @ w)$

understand existence in every possible world, not merely having the property of existence essentially in the trivial sense in which that comes out true on Plantinga’s conception of an essential property.

²⁴ Indeed, Popper reckoned universal generalizations to have zero probability, an irremediable property, so that one could never establish wide-scope scientific theories, one could only refute them.

whereas AP, it's negation says

$$(AP) \neg \exists w(G @ w)$$

which is equivalent to

$$(AP) \forall w \neg (G @ w).$$

However, to get a sense of the grain of truth behind Rowe's point, consider this observation from Robert Adams. "If God cannot exist at all unless it is necessary that God exist, then the claim that God's existence is possible implies that it is possible that it is necessary that God exists. This proposition, that it is possible that it is necessary that God exist, is what any supporter of the modal argument must defend in trying to justify the premise that God's existence is possible. An alert critic of the argument will not let him get away with less" (Adams 1980, 235). Rowe is at least partially alert here, for he sees that though PP is technically an existential claim, given the definition of God as a necessary being it has implications for every world. However, he is not fully alert, for by similar reasoning AP also has implications for every world. For if there is even one world in which necessary existence is not instantiated then not a single world instantiates it. The fact of the matter is that since we are working with the definition of God as a necessary being, either side is committed to saying what is the case in every possible world. I call this the Symmetry Rebuttal to Rowe's Extraordinary Property argument against PP.

Finally, I want to consider an argument due to Earl Conee which suggests that the existence of a necessary being has some surprising consequences. In "Why Not Nothing?"²⁵ Conee considers a world W in which nothing exists.²⁶ He has this to say about the thesis that

²⁵ Chapter five of Conee and Sider forthcoming.

²⁶ It is hard for me even to make sense of this notion. If we represent possible worlds by sets, then I suppose W would be represented by the empty set. But is the empty set really *something*, I find this totally confusing. Sets and fusions could be represented by lists: the list of things in the set or in the fusion. But then an empty world would be represented by a list with no items. Is this a coherent notion? What's the difference between a list with no items

there is a necessary being “If it is correct, then we were making a mistake in thinking of the totally thing-free W as a possibility. Yet what would be impossible about W, exactly? Just that it lacks objects? But how could that be impossible? Temporary emptiness of some spatial region is possible. Once we grant this, there seems to be no upper limit on how much space can be empty and for how long. So why not a whole empty reality?” (Conee forthcoming, 3). First, I don’t think much weight should be put on the spatiotemporal argument. For one thing, it seems to be operating on a Newtonian conception of space according to which space can be literally empty. However if relativity theory is correct and Minkowski space describes reality then there is no such thing as absolutely empty space. Indeed, space-time regions are identified by objects rather than objects being identified by filling points in an X,Y,Z coordinate space. At any rate, this is not the main objection. The main objection has to do with non-empty apparently possible worlds.

Apparent possibilities vanish when we ask what sort of a reality such a being would allow to exist. For instance, it seems clear that there are some evils that God would not allow – perhaps the existence of suffering for no good reason, or the existence of unjustified human degradation. So, if the traditional God is a necessary being, such evil is not even possible. The appearance that the evil was even possible would be an illusion. Yet we can spell out in as much detail as we like how things go a reality that includes such evils but not God. Leaving God out of the situation does not give any appearance of making it an impossibility. So its impossibility is dubious. (Conee p. 5)

This argument proves too much. That is, atheism has its own problem of Vanishing Possibilities. The idea of a necessary being is apparently coherent, very few people endorse incoherence arguments for atheism. If there’s something incoherent about it, then it’s hidden beneath the surface. But if apparent possibilities can hide their impossibility under the surface, then the original objection is drained of much of its force. Surely there being an object worthy of worship

and a blank piece of paper? Is my brand-new notebook filled from cover to cover with itemless lists? This is how I feel when I try to grasp the concept of an empty world.

is possible, but if Findlay is right²⁷ this entails there being a necessary being. Also, most substantive metaphysical theses are presumed necessarily true if true at all. So both the theory of atomism and atomless gunk both seem possible, but only one can be, the other must be impossible. The truth is there is just no telling a priori what the modal lay of the land will be after analysis is complete. Regardless of how any number of metaphysical theses turn out, there will be lots of apparently possible rivals left impossible.

Another thing to note here is how easy it is to let thinking about strictly logical possibility seep into our thinking about broadly logical or metaphysical possibility. When something is strictly logically impossible it entails a contradiction; it is *intrinsically incoherent* at some level of analysis. Broadly logical impossibility is not like that, there is no *intrinsic* incoherence.²⁸ Metaphysical possibility is a *relational* property it depends on the way things are in other worlds.²⁹ So the lack of any sense of incoherence is not very good evidence that something will turn out to be broadly logically possible if that thing is logically related to theses which are metaphysically necessary if true. Since the ontological argument takes place in just such a context, the Argument from Vanishing Possibilities is not a good objection to the Ontological argument. Since any interesting metaphysical thesis entails the impossibility of its apparently possible rivals, I will call this the Symmetry Rebuttal to the Problem of Vanishing Possibilities.

There is one thing, however, that deserves to be noted about this response. Since the impossibility of apparently possible theses is a pervasive phenomenon, the principle that conceivability is evidence for possibility might seem to be threatened. Though it does emphasize the inevitable defeasibility of the connection, I think it remains intuitively correct that

²⁷ See Plantinga 1965, Chapter 10.

²⁸ Of course the strictly logically impossible is also broadly logically impossible. The point is that the converse is not true: the *merely* broadly logically impossible is not strictly logically impossible.

²⁹ Please note that this is a *formal* point having to do with Kripke-style relational semantics for modal logic.

conceivability is prima facie evidence for possibility. If this is correct, then given the Conceivability Principle the inference to PP is prima facie justified and since propositional justification transmits over deduction,³⁰ so is belief in God.

In this paper I have presented an interpretation of Saint Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God. We saw that the argument as interpreted seems to have a gap regarding the possibility of God's existence. Modern modal versions of the argument make this premise explicit, and the Benefit of the Doubt argument suggests that the now-supplied premise is acceptable. However, the Symmetry Problem suggested an impasse between the Anselmian argument and its atheological counterpart. I attempted to break this stalemate using the Conceivability Principle to establish that the Possibility Premise had an advantage. This argument rejected the principle that conceivability entails possibility, but relied on maintaining an intuitive connection between the two notions. This resulted in a defeasible inference that God's existence is possible. I considered Rowe's Extraordinary Property argument against the conceivability of a necessary being which suggested that necessary existence was somehow a more committing property than its complement. However the Symmetry Rebuttal showed that this was a mistaken impression: both versions of the ontological argument commit their adherents to saying what's true in all possible worlds. Finally, I considered the Vanishing Possibilities argument which suggested that the existence of a necessary being had very unexpected consequences and which threatened to drive a wedge between conceivability and possibility. I made a Symmetry Rebuttal to that argument as well, pointing out that no matter which side is correct there will be any number (infinitely many on a profligate theory of properties³¹) of apparently possible theses which turn out to be false. Furthermore, the

³⁰ Or if it does, the ontological argument is not a good candidate for exception.

³¹ See Plantinga 1974, 218.

defeasibility of the inference from conceivability to possibility was already granted and the Problem of Vanishing Possibilities does not eliminate the intuitive link between conceivability and possibility. I concluded that the ontological argument can provide prima facie justification for theism.

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