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Gödel's ontological argument: a reply to Oppy

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Graham Oppy has contributed recently to the discussion of Gödel's ontological argument with an attempted refutation (Oppy 1996). Although seemingly promising, I will show here that this attempt fails to undermine Gödel's argument.

Very briefly, Gödel's argument proceeds in the following way.[1] One begins with the primitive notion of a positive property. A positive property is a 'great-making' property which entails no defect. The property of God-likeness (G) is defined in this way: One is God-like iff one has as essential properties all and only positive properties. Given a number of axioms concerning positive properties, one can prove that a unique possible individual instantiates God-likeness, i.e. that there is (at least) one possible world inhabited by this unique God-like being. Furthermore, necessary existence is a positive property. Thus, in some possible world this unique God-like being necessarily exists, and so, in S5 modal logic, this being exists in the actual world.

Oppy's strategy is the strategy which the monk Gaunilo used to try to refute Anselm's ontological argument. This strategy attempts to show that if the theist purports to have proven the existence of God, the same reasoning may be used to prove the existence of many theologically repugnant entities, e.g. demi-gods, perfect islands, etc. Oppy's particular objection is motivated in the following way: since the theist defines God-likeness, the atheist may define a similar property, call it 'God*-likeness' ('G*'). Let God*-likeness be the property one has iff one has as essential properties only and almost all of the positive properties, including necessary existence (e.g., all positive properties except omniscience, and only positive properties). Since two things are identical only if they share the same essential properties, the definition of God*-likeness ensures that the atheist's being is distinct from God. Furthermore, a God*-like being must also be necessarily existent, since necessary existence is a property entailed by God*-likeness.

Oppy cannot draw the conclusion that such a being exists, however. There is a crucial disanalogy between his argument and the theist's. This disanalogy becomes evident when we look at Oppy's argument, which he

[1] See Anderson 1990 for details of a strengthened formulation of Gödel's argument. This is the formulation which both Oppy and I address, although I will also consider a revision to this argument. For now, 'Gödel's argument' and 'the theist's argument' will refer to the formulation found in Anderson 1990.

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presents in two formulations. These two formulations are similar, and I will show that the first is defective, and then argue that the second fails for similar reasons.

The first formulation introduces a new definition; that of God*-likeness, and it both shares a number of axioms in common with Gödel's argument and introduces a few new axioms. Here are the Axioms and Definitions which lead to the difficulty (those marked with an asterisk have been introduced by Oppy):

Definition 1*: x is God*-like iff x has as essential properties those and only those properties which are positive, except for $P_1, \ldots, P_n$.

Axiom 1: If a property is positive, then its negation [or complement] is not positive.

Axiom 2: Any property entailed by [= strictly implied by] a positive property is positive.

Axiom 3*: The property of being God*-like is positive.

Axiom 4: If a property is positive, it is necessarily positive.

Consider the positive properties $P_1, \ldots, P_n$. Since these are not essential properties, a God*-like being either has these properties contingently or not at all. We can show, however, that the property of having a positive property contingently or not at all (i.e., not having it in every possible world) is not positive. Doing so requires the following axiom:

Axiom 7: For any property P, if P is positive, then being necessarily P is positive.[2]

Axiom 7 states that having a positive property necessarily is itself a positive property, or as Gödel put it 'the necessitation of a perfective is a perfective'.[3] It follows from this that for any positive property P, having P non-necessarily (contingently or not possibly) is a non-positive property.

Given this result, we can show that any being distinct from God has

[2] So-called 'modal' properties, such as being necessarily P, are treated by Gödel just as any other property is treated. Gödel's proof, in fact, requires at the very minimum one such modal property, that of necessary existence. The matter of whether or not such properties are ultimately acceptable is one which I will ignore at the present time, given that Gödel and his commentators accept them in the course of the proof.

[3] See Gödel 1995, p. 435. Gödel introduces this axiom in a note appended to his ontological proof. He mentions that the inclusion of this axiom, along with an axiom that states that existence is a positive property ('being is a perfective', p. 435), allows one to conclude that necessary existence is positive. Gödel also states 'that the necessity of a positive property is positive is the essential presupposition for the ontological proof', an even stronger endorsement of Axiom 7 (Gödel 1995, p. 435). Although it doesn't play a role in the versions of Gödel's ontological proof in Anderson 1990 and Oppy 1996, Axiom 7 is included in at least one version of the proof. For more on this, see Anderson and Gettings 1996.

some non-positive essential property. Take, for example, P_1, which by Definition 1* is a positive property. It follows then from Axiom 7 that being necessarily P_1 is positive.

Now look at Axiom 1. It states that if a property is positive, then its negation is not positive. We can conclude then that being non-essentially P_1 is a non-positive property. One has P_1 non-essentially when one has it either contingently or not at all. Thus, by Definition 1*, something which is God*-like has a non-positive property, namely being non-essentially P_1. Since this is true of a God*-like being in every possible world, G* entails a non-positive property. Axiom 2 tells us that positive properties only entail other positive properties, so G* is not positive. This directly contradicts Axiom 3*, however, so we have drawn a contradiction from Definition 1* combined with Axioms 1, 2, 3*, 4 and 7.

When we consider Gödel's argument, his Definition 1 and Axiom 3 are consistent with Axioms 1, 2, 4 and 7; no contradiction follows from them. The blame then lies with Definition 1* and Axiom 3*, and Oppy's first formulation fails.

One may hold out more hope for the second formulation. This formulation introduces the notion of a positive† property. The idea is to take a proper subset, †, of the positive properties, such that † contains necessary existence, and call each of the properties in the subset a 'positive†' property. Notice that every positive† property is positive and that there is at least one positive property which is not positive†. We can show in this case too that Oppy's argument falls into contradiction. Oppy starts with a definition of God†-likeness (G†):

Definition 1†: x is God†-like iff x has as essential properties those and only those properties which are positive†.

An argument much like the one above shows that God†-likeness is not positive. Since at least one positive property, P_i, is not positive†, it follows that God†-likeness entails being non-essentially P_i. By Axioms 1, 4, and 7 and the reasoning above, being non-essentially P_i is a non-positive property, since P_i is positive. Thus, God†-likeness entails a non-positive property, and, by Axiom 2, it must then be non-positive itself. Since all positive† properties are, by definition, positive, God†-likeness is not positive†. This conclusion contradicts one of Oppy's axioms:

Axiom 3†: The property of being God†-like is positive.

So a contradiction follows from Definition 1†, Axiom 3† and Axioms 1, 2, 4 and 7.

At this point one may object that I have drawn a contradiction from assumptions which Oppy doesn't even make. In his second formulation Oppy never explicitly endorses Axioms 1, 2, 4 and 7. Instead he replaces

these with correlate axioms of his own, from which no contradiction can be drawn. How then is the contradiction above a defect of his argument?

I maintain that Oppy is at least implicitly committed to Axioms 1, 2, 4 and 7, since to reject them is to reject the notion of positive properties altogether; a notion he must employ in order to formulate his objection. To see why this is so, we must consider what a positive property is. Sobel noted that Gödel said precious little about what a positive property is. Gödel's notes state that 'positive' is meant in the 'moral aesthetic sense' and in the sense of 'pure attribution as opposed to privation' (Sobel, 1987). In addition to these brief remarks, however, the axioms themselves characterize positive properties. Axiom 1, for example, says that positive properties are such that they have non-positive complements. Axiom 2 tells us that positive properties only entail other positive properties. Axioms 4 and 7 state, respectively, that positive properties are necessarily positive and that having them necessarily is positive. To accept the notion of a positive property is to accept that they have these characteristics. Axioms 1, 2, 4 and 7, then, are inseparable from positive properties themselves. One cannot make use of the notion of positive properties while denying these axioms.

Oppy does make use of positive properties, of course; his characterization of positive† properties is parasitic on the notion of positive properties. Since 'positive†' is defined in terms of 'positive', Oppy is committed to the notion of positive properties and the axioms which characterize them, such as Axioms 1, 2 , 4 and 7. To avoid a contradiction Oppy must reject the notion of a positive property altogether, but he cannot do this without abandoning positive† properties as well.

Since Oppy is committed to Axioms 1, 2, 4 and 7, and these axioms are inconsistent with Definition 1† and Axiom 3†, his second formulation fails. The two formulations share the same defect; they both introduce properties (God*-likeness and God†-likeness) which can be shown to be non-positive, given the other assumptions of the arguments. Without the premisses that God*-likeness and God†-likeness are positive, the arguments cannot proceed to the conclusion that such properties are necessarily (or even actually) instantiated.

The difficulty above is general enough to pertain to other Gaunilist arguments as well. The general Gaunilist strategy is to introduce a property which will play a role analogous to that of God-likeness in the theist's argument. One cannot introduce such a property, however, without it entailing some non-positive property, and thus whatever the Gaunilist proposes must be non-positive itself. This is enough to derail the objector's project, since the proposed property must be positive in order to show that it is possibly instantiated. Without this crucial step the objection cannot show the theist that his reasoning leads to an absurd conclusion, namely the

necessary existence of a non-God-like being.

This defence of Gödel's argument may raise suspicion regarding the proof. One result we may obtain from the argument above is that it is necessary that there is no being besides God whose essence is a positive property. This produces no inconsistency for the theist, but it should raise eyebrows concerning just what a positive property is. Another problematic area of the proof revolves around Axiom 7. The assumption that any conjunction of positive properties is itself a positive property is not a trivial one, and it ultimately justifies the assertion that God-likeness is consistent (i.e., possibly instantiated). This is where Leibniz's attempt to prove God's possibility is most questionable. How can we assume that the set of all positive, or in Leibniz's case, simple, properties is consistent? This is a question which Gödel's argument doesn't answer any better than Leibniz's.

I will leave these worries for further investigation. If there are defects in Gödel's proof, they are not revealed by Gaunilist objections such as Oppy's. I suspect that if fault is to be found with this ontological argument, it will appear in the form of false, or at least questionable, axioms such as Axiom 7.[4]

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