Experiments in Computational Metaphysics:

Gödel’s Proof of God’s Existence

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**ABSTRACT**

“Computer scientists prove the existence of God” --- variants of this headline appeared the international press in autumn 2013. Unfortunately, many media reports had moderate success in communicating to the wider public what actually had been achieved and what not.

This article outlines the main findings of the authors joint work in computational metaphysics. More precisely, the article focuses on their computer-supported analysis of variants and recent emendations of Kurt Gödel’s modern ontological argument for the existence of God. In the conducted experiments automated theorem provers generated some interesting and relevant findings.

**1. Introduction**

In autumn 2013 headlines such as “Computer Scientist ‘Prove’ God Exists”, “God’s Existence Theorem Is Correct”, “God Is Alive”, etc., appeared the media, first in Germany and Austria, and subsequently in the international press. Unfortunately, many of these media reports had moderate success in communicating to the wider public what actually had been achieved and what not.

This paper provides some more detailed background information (in chronological order) on the actual research that had triggered these media reports.

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| ScottsProof |
| **Fig. 1.**Gödel’s ontological argument for the existence of God [Gödel]; here the variant by Scott [Scott] is presented. |

The results presented here were achieved in a close collaboration between the two authors. Both were introduced to each other after a presentation Benzmüller delivered in November 2012 to the Kurt Gödel Society in Vienna. In this presentation he demonstrated how quantified modal logics (QML) [24.][17.], and other non-classical logics, can be elegantly embedded [9.] in classical higher-order logic (HOL, Church’s type theory [1.]). Moreover, by employing the embedding approach, reasoning tools for HOL become readily and effectively applicable for reasoning within QML [4.][10.]. At the end of his talk, Benzmüller pointed out that the outlined approach should be applicable to formalize and verify Gödel’s modern version of the ontological argument [19.][26.] (which is formulated in a higher-order QML; cf. Fig. 1) with theorem provers for HOL. Benzmüller’s proposal was partly inspired by Fitting’s textbook [16.], and he had previously attempted some formalization along Fitting’s work, but at the time still without sufficient insistence and success.

Woltzenlogel Paleo was also highly interested in a formalization of Gödel’s proof, and he had previously studied the detailed structure it. Moreover, he was working on a modal higher-order natural deduction calculus which he intended implement and to subsequently employ (in a direct approach as opposed to Benzmüller’s indirect embedding approach) for an interactive verification of Gödel’s ontological argument. Woltzenlogel Paleo was facing a life threatening illness at the time of their meeting in Vienna, and in addition to his deep logical interest in Gödel’s work, he also had a spiritual interest in the planned joint projected. In fact, his plan was to present a successful formalization of Gödel’s argument to Priest Edvaldo and his church in Piracicaba.

Initially Benzmüller and Woltzenlogel Paleo worked largely independent, each one following his own approach. However, there was frequent and fruitful exchange of information (mainly by email).

**2. Initial Experiments: Scott’s variant of Gödel’s proof**

In summer 2013, Benzmüller reported success with some first experiments. From that moment on both authors tightly joint forces and continued the studies together. The primary focus was for the time being on the embedding approach. However, studies in the direct approach were not given completely up, and later the two quasi orthogonal approaches directions were even integrated when Woltzenlogel Paleo implemented a natural calculus for higher-order QML in Coq on top of the embeddings approach; more on this below.

In the initial series of experiments [5.] the HOL automated theorem provers LEO-II [3.] and Satallax [15.] were employed. In addition, the HOL model finder Nitpick [14.] was used. The TPTP THF language [31.] served as a concrete syntax format for the encoding higher-order QML in HOL. The THF language is supported as common input syntax by the above reasoning tools (and several others). The initial series of experiments concentrated on Scott’s adaption (see Fig. 1) of Gödel’s ontological argument. An essential difference between Gödel’s and Scott’s versions is that the latter adds a conjunct in the definition D2 of essential properties (this will be discussed further below).

The findings from these experiments on Scott’s variant were manifold (they were obtained on a standard MacBook):

1. The axioms (and definitions) are consistent. This was confirmed by Nitpick, which presented simple model within a few seconds.
2. Theorem T1 follows from Axioms A1 and A2 in modal logic K (which is entailed in stronger modal logics such as KB, S4 and S5, so that result also holds for these logics). This was proved by LEO-II and Satallax in a few milliseconds. In fact, the left to right direction of the equivalence A1 is sufficient to prove T1.
3. Corollary C follows from T1, D1 and A3, again already in modal logic K. This was proved by LEO-II and Satallax in a few milliseconds.
4. Theorem T2 follows from A1, D1, A4 and D2 in modal logic K. Again, the provers got this result quickly, Satallax within milliseconds and LEO-II within 20s.
5. Theorem T3, necessary existence of a God-like entity, follows from D1, C, T2, D3 and A5. Again, this was proved by LEO-II and Satallax in a few milliseconds. However, this time modal logic KB was required to obtain the result. KB strengthens modal logic K by postulating the B axiom, which enforces symmetry of the accessibility relation between possible worlds. In modal logic K theorem T2 does not follow from the axioms and definitions. This was confirmed by Nitpick, which reported a countermodel.
6. The God-like entity, whose existence was proved in Step (5), is flawless in the sense that it may only exemplify positive properties. The provers got this quickly (in modal logic KB) from A1 and D1; Satallax within milliseconds and LEO-II within 20s.
7. Moreover, this God-like entity is unique, i.e. monotheism is a consequence of Gödel’s theory. Satallax proved this in milliseconds from D1 and flawlessness of God.

In pen and paper proofs in philosophy foundational logic assumptions are often not made explicit. This has also been the case for Gödel’s proof script. In computer formalizations, however, the detailed settings of the employed logic have to explicitly provided and concrete choices cannot be avoided. That is, the very logic settings become fully transparent. The results reported above were achieved in a setting with full comprehension (which is inherited in the embedding approach from the HOL meta logic), rigid terms and a possibilist (constant domain) notion of quantification over individuals.

In a second series of experiments, the encoding of the quantifiers for individuals has been varied to capture also actualist quantification (varying domain). However, none of our previous results was invalidated by this modification.

Automated theorem provers often find proofs that differ from human generated proofs. This apparently was also the case in our experiments. By analyzing the proofs, one can for example see that the property of being self-identical, which is mentioned Gödel’s scriptum, can in fact be avoided in the proof.

**3. Possible and necessary thruths and the modal collapse**

Anselm’s ontological argument does not properly differentiate between contingent, possible and necessary truths. Gödel in contrast formalized his proof in a second-order modal logic, which supports such a discrimination. For example, Gödel’s corollary C (see Fig. 1) proves from preceding assumptions that it is *possible* for God to exists. Corollary C is then used further to prove T3, *necessarily* God exists. This discrimination of possible and necessary truths via modal operators enabled Gödel to address a relevant critique, studied by Leibniz, about St. Anselm’s original work on the ontological argument: Anselm’s argument had presupposed that it is possible for a God-like being to exist. At first sight, it thus appears that Gödel’s argument very convincingly addresses these (and other) issues. However, as Sobel [28.][29.] showed, Gödel’s axioms and definitions are so powerful that they imply what is known as the *modal collapse*: contingent truth implies necessary truth, in formal notation P 🡪 []P. From this we also get that possible truth implies necessary truth and vice versa. In other words, there are no contingent truths. One may even see modal collapse as a result against free will.

The theorem provers were in fact able to confirm the modal collapse within a few seconds. Moreover, the provers also showed that the result is independent of using possibilist or actualist quantifiers (for individuals).

What does this now mean for Gödel’s ontological argument? Is it thus doomed to fail? Well, not necessarily. On the one hand note that modal collapse, being derivable from the assumptions of the ontological argument, may actually serve those philosophical views well which support forms of determinism. Kovac [23.] goes as far to argue that modal collapse may eventually be in-line with Gödel‘s philosophical viewpoints. On the other hand, modal collapse has recently incited several philosophers to develop emendations of Gödel’s argument in order to remedy the situation.

The authors, in collaboration with Leon Weber, have meanwhile extended their computer-supported analysis to several of these emendations [11.]. The findings of these more recent studied will be addressed in Sec. 5 below.

**4. A subtle difference in the notion of essence**

The above results apply to Scott’s variant [26.] of the Gödel’s proof which slightly differs from the version [19.] that was found in Gödel’s ‘Nachlass’. One difference is to be found in the notion of essence. In Scott’s version essence is defined as “*An essence of an individual is a property possessed by it and necessarily implying any of its properties*”. Gödel in contrast defines “*An essence of an individual is a property that is necessarily implying any of its properties*”, that is, he is omitting the conjunct “*possessed by it*”. So what happens if this conjunct in the definition of D2 (see in Fig. 1) is left out?

To study the effects the authors have replayed the experiments as reported above, but this time for the varied definition D2. Interestingly, in step (1), the model finder Nitpick failed to report a model. To assess the situation, the authors subsequently tried to use the HOL theorem provers to prove the inconsistency of the modified set of axioms and definitions. To their surprise, the prover LEO-II indeed succeeded (in about 30 seconds) in doing so. Both authors have previously not been aware of this inconsistency. In fact, related comments in philosophy papers often classify Scott’s modification only as a ‘cosmetic’ change to what is often called a minor oversight by Gödel. So what causes this inconsistency and how is the argument working? Unfortunately, the technical, machine-oriented proof object that was returned by LEO-II has been so inaccessible that even Benzmüller, the developer of the tool, failed for a long time to extract a persuasive human-level argument from it.

**5. Repeating the experiments in Isabelle/HOL and Coq**

The automated theorem provers LEO-II and Satallax do not offer small and trusted kernels to represent their proofs in and their low-level, machine-oriented proof calculi are making it particularly hard for humans to follow the very technical chain of proof steps they report. Though their background theory sound, their actual reasoning could be flawed due to potential, yet undetected bugs in their implementations.

To address this issue, respectively to add another layer of trust to their results, the authors therefore decided to repeat and verify all previous experiments by using the prominent proof assistants Isabelle/HOL [25.] and Coq [12.].

Isabelle/HOL in particular provides strong internal proof automation facilities, and it integrates (or links to) external automated theorem provers, including LEO-II and Satallax. Moreover, means to reconstruct external proofs within Isabelle/HOL’s highly trusted kernel have been developed in recent years [13.][30.]. By using these facilities the authors quickly succeeded in replaying their experiments within Isabelle/HOL, which reassured their previous findings [6.]. Unfortunately, however, proof reconstruction in Isabelle/HOL failed for one of the reported result, namely LEO-II’s inconsistency result as discussed above.

In addition to Isabelle/HOL, the authors also replayed the experiments in the Coq proof assistant . However, the main motivation now was to demonstrate that the embedding approach not only serves proof automation well but also enables user interaction. Woltzenlogel Paleo quickly succeeded in reconstructing the findings interactively within Coq. As part of this work the authors also demonstrated how a direct natural deduction calculus [27.] for higher-modal logic can be implemented within the embedding approach as tactics in Coq. This offers interesting perspectives for future work to integrate proof search in the direct and the embedding approach.

**6. Further Experiments: Emendations of Gödel’s proof**

The success of the experiments, in particular, the observed nearly perfect match between the argumentation granularity in Gödel’s ontological argument and the proof automation capabilities of the HOL provers in the embedding approach was by no means expected. A very relevant question thus came up, namely whether the approach would scale also for the verification of other research papers in this area. The authors therefore decided to look at more recent emendations on the ontological argument attempting to remedy the modal collapse.

Hajek [20.][21.] proposed the use of cautious instead of full comprehension principles, and Fitting [16.] took greater care of the semantics of higher-order quantifiers in the presence of modalities. Others, such as C.A. Anderson [1.], Hajek [22.] and Bjordal [13.], proposed emendations of Gödel's axioms and definitions. They require neither comprehension restrictions nor more complex semantics. Therefore, they are technically simpler to analyze within the embedding approach. The authors have formalized those using Isabelle/HOL together with the automated HOL reasoners. The approach again performed very well. Like in the previous experiments, the HOL reasoners quickly responded to the formalized argumentation steps, either by automatically confirming them as theorems, or by refuting them, in which case counter models were presented.

Interestingly, the HOL provers not only confirmed many claimed results, but also exposed a few mistakes and produced novel insights. In particular, the provers were able to settle a long standing debate on the redundancy of axioms A4 and A5 in different settings that was going on between Magari, Anderson and Hajek [11.].

These additional experiments strikingly demonstrate the potential benefits of a computational metaphysics as exemplified here in which humans and computer programs joined forces in order to settle philosophical disputes. As the authors believe, this is pretty much in line with Leibniz vision known as “Calculemus!”.

**7. Leo-II’s inconsistency proof**

Inspired by a discussion of the inconsistency issue with Chad Brown, Benzmüller recently succeeded in reconstructing and verifying LEO-II’s argument by hand within Isabelle/HOL. Once revealed and understood, the argument is in fact surprisingly simple:

1. The argument starts from axiom A1 “*Either a property or its negation is positive, but not both*” and axiom A2 “*A property necessarily implied by a positive property is positive*”. These two assumptions imply theorem T1 “*Positive properties are possibly exemplified*”, as we already know.
2. Now take the modified definition of D2 “*An essence of an individual is a property that is necessarily implying any of its properties*” and consider the empty property (or alternatively, the property of being not self-identical) as a candidate. It follows Lemma 1: “*The empty property is an essence of every entity*”.
3. From the definition of necessary existence “*Necessary existence of an individual is the necessary exemplification of all its essences*”, modal axiom B and Lemma 1 follows Lemma 2: “*Exemplification of necessary existence is not possible*”.
4. Axiom A5 “Necessary existence is a positive property”, theorem T1 and Lemma 2 now imply falsehood.

LEO-II’s proof object actually contains the most crucial property instantiation performed in Step 2, however, this key step gets lost in the technical noise of the proof. It is important to remark, that this instantiation has not been synthesized by LEO-II, e.g. by employing higher-order (pre-)unification. Instead it has been guessed during proof search using the blindly guessing primitive substitution rule. As experts know, this rule can unfortunately not be abandoned in HOL theorem proving (without loosing Henkin-completeness) [3.]. This points to an interesting aspect: attempts to repeat this successful inconsistency proof of LEO-II with first-order theorem provers will likely be doomed to fail, since the only source to come up with this crucial instantiation of the empty property appears to be the comprehension schemes of set theory.

**6. Discussion**

Ontological arguments in the tradition of Anselm’s, since their first revelation, have fascinated generations of philosophers. In fact, they ususally trigger strong reactions, against or in favor of them. In philosophical circles the debate is not yet settled and the allurement of ontological arguments seems far from fading. Readers of the public media reports that were triggered by the authors recent work, however, overwhelmingly seem to reject them. This becomes apparent from hundreds of blog entries linked at the respective media websites. Such blog entries have recently been further analysed by Fuhrmann [20.]. Clearly, without a certain level of education in metapyhics, modern logic and the axiomatic method, Gödel’s modal ontological argument, appears largely inaccessible. This may provide some level of explanation. Generally, a certain amount of philosophical education seems required for not being irritated by the ontological argument in the first place.

However, the media writers are also to be blamed, because of their apparent interest in creating ‘headline stories’, and in copying, nitpicking and obfuscating text passages from each other instead of presenting unbiased, properly investigated and individually prepared information. For example, in an early interview on the topic to the German edition of Spiegel Online, Benzmüller mentioned that ‘the initial experiments were conducted on his MacBook’. While this has been true, he should have better used the neutral term ‘notebook’, since the experiments can (and have been) repeated also with other computer technology. The original Spiegel Online article mentioned ‘MacBook’, however, it did not prominently overemphasize this point (and a good writer could have further clarified the independence of the exepriment results anyway). However, when the news subsequently made its way to the US, some intentionally (and very stupidly) obfuscated headlines appeared such as “Researchers say they used MacBook to prove Gödel’s God theorem” or “God exists, say Apple fanboy scientists”. Such headline stories were contributed even from ‘award winning creative directors’ such as Chris Matyszczyk, who in fact never talked to any of the authors directly. One may argue that these articles therefore say a lot more about media quality and media standards in the US than about the quality of the actual research content addressed. And it is little surprise that such intentially obfuscated and jaundiced media reports trigger negative attitudes of bloggers towards the ontological argument.

Finally, the authors think that philosophical tradition has to be blamed to a certain extent, since comparable few texts seem to be available which are trying to appropriately communicate the ontological argument to a wider audience. The authors themselves, who have began their studies on the topic only recently, have experienced that a large proportion of the existing texts are targeting a rather exclusive circle of readers sharing a significant background expertise, in particular, on the detailed historical developent in the area. This in turn excludes (and presumably negatively affects) those readers not willing to clear their backlog before commenting on the topic. It seems that other academic disciplines have in fact achieved a higher level of historical and contextual independence in their modern literature. (But maybe this is not really a worthwile option for philosophy).

But what is now the authors position on the ontological argument?

Well, both share the opinion with proponents of Gödel’s work that prominent objections to his proof, including Gaunilo-like repectively Oppy-like parodies, are not on a par with Gödel’s work and its recent emendations. Often they appear flawed. (And it is further work to investigate and eventually confirm some of these flaws with our technology).

On the other hand, there clearly are theologically and metaphysically relevant objections, including the modal collapse, which are not yet fully settled. Since several of these objections are beyond the authors expertise it seems innapropriate for them, at least at present, to comment on those. However, as a conclusion one may say that the ontological argument succeeds at least in the following sense: it shows that *belief in a (God-like) supreme being is not necessarily irrational*.

The authors actual contribution is a technological approach and machinery that, as has been well demonstrated here, can fruitfully support further logical investigations in this area. This machinery may eventually even be helpful for settling some of the open questions. In particular it seems ready to be used with the aim of minimizing logic related causes of defect in this area. As an expedient this machinery should (at least in the long run) be able to significantly ease the practical work in metaphysics.

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