THE TRINITY ARGUMENT

11302991

Ontological arguments for the existence of God (OA) seem to necessarily rest upon the assumption that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect in order to show that he is the “greatest possible being” (GPB). Unfortunately, as the so-called Incoherence Argument (IA) points out, it is not altogether clear how a single being (the GPB) can simultaneously instantiate all three of these properties and remain a coherent or self-consistent being (CB) =df a being whose essential properties do not imply a logical contradiction. In part I of this paper, I will present Anselm’s version of OA, enumerate Broad’s formulation of IA, with the aim of highlighting the conflict between them, and in part II I will present the “Trinity Argument,” (TA) my solution to the conflict.

I

I have chosen to use Anselm’s formulation of OA (with the caveat that I have changed the scope of (1) and (5) to “the greatest possible being,” rather than “the greatest being which can be imagined/conceived” so as to avoid objections to OA which stem from the observation that conceivability =/= possibility). rather than a more modern formulation (viz. Platinga) because it is far simpler to see the interaction between IA and Anselm’s OA than Platinga’s OA.

*Anselm’s Ontological Argument:*

1. God is a being than which no greater being is possible (the being which is maximally endowed with “great-making properties”).

2. The idea of God exists in the mind alone.

3. A being which exists both in the mind and in reality is greater than a being that exists only in the mind.

4. If God only exists in the mind, then we can conceive of a greater being, one which exists in reality.

5. We cannot imagine something greater than the greatest possible being (God).

6. Therefore, God exists.

On inspection, it is apparent that OA relies upon the assumption that God is possible. Since all possible things are necessarily self-consistent, it must be the case that if God is possible, he must be self-consistent. Should a critic desire to attack OA, formulating an argument which casts doubt upon the self-consistence of God would be a wise means of doing so.

To that end, Broad presents IA as follows (again, I have taken the liberty of amending “being than which no greater can be imagined” to “being than which no greater is possible”):

*Broad’s Inconsistence Argument:*

1. There exist at least three great-making properties attributed to God by classical theism: omnipotence (X), omniscience (Y), and moral perfection (Z) [Hereafter CTA].

2. If the phrase 'God is a being than which no greater being is possible' is not meaningless verbiage, an existing GPB would be X & an existing GPB would be Y & an existing GPB would be Z.

3. It is false that an existing GPB would be X or it is false that an existing GPB would be Y or it is false that an existing GPB would be Z.

4. It is false that (an existing GPB would be X & an existing GPB would be Y & an existing GPB would be Z).

5. Therefore, the phrase 'a being than which none greater is possible' is meaningless verbiage (akin to a “married bachelor”).

IA keys in on the concept that it is logically impossible for a being to instantiate more than two out of the three CTA ascribed to God simultaneously; an omnipotent and omniscient being avoids the problem of being unable to sin as it has no moral constraints, an omniscient and morally perfect being avoids the problem of evilbecause such a being lacks the power to create perfectly, and an omnipotent and morally perfect being is able to create beings with true free-will without being morally responsible for the ultimate result of that creation (as it would be if it was omniscient), yet a being which embodies all three of the CTA is vulnerable to all three objections, and several more besides. This being the case, it is not only impossible for a “greatest possible being” to exist by virtue of the fact that it is incoherent, it also appears to be the case that impossible for one to exist simply because there exists a three-way tie for “greatest possible being” between the possible beings with attribute sets [X-1, Y, Z], [X, Y-1, Z], and [X, Y, Z-1], meaning that there are at best “maximally great possible beings” but not a single “greatest possible being.”

II

In the face of this seemingly damning objection, I would like to venture the following argument in defense of the logical coherence of God:

*The Trinity Argument:*

1. Taking into account CTA and IA, there possibly exist at least three possible “maximally great possible beings.”

2. Things which are not “maximally great possible beings” are less great than “maximally great possible beings.”

3. It is not possible for a possible being to do something impossible.

4. It is impossible for there to be a being greater than the greatest possible being.

5. It is impossible for any of the “maximally great possible beings” to be greater than the greatest possible being.

6. It is impossible for any of the “maximally great possible beings” to be greater than any of the other “maximally great possible beings.”

6. It is impossible for any of the “maximally great possible beings” to be greater than itself.

7. Therefore, each of the “maximally great possible beings” is the GPB.

What I’m driving at here is the notion that [X-1, Y, Z], [X, Y-1, Z], and [X, Y, Z-1] all share the property of “being the GPB” concurrently even though they are separate beings. This is concurrent with the view of the trinity outlined under the same lines of classical theism (CT) from which Anselm and Broad draw the CTA, namely, that “in the unity of the Godhead there are Three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, these Three Persons being truly distinct one from another.” This is more clearly seen by translating the doctrine into the terms of Anselm, Broad, and this paper: “The property of ‘being the GPB’ is shared by three maximally great possible beings, [X-1, Y, Z], [X, Y-1, Z], and [X, Y, Z-1] (Note: these are not meant to be analogous assignations, i.e. [X-1, Y, Z] is not necessarily the Father, &c.), these Three Persons being truly distinct one from another.” Put even more simply:

1. God is the GPB. (Anselm)

2. If x is the GPB, x is God. (Transitive Property)

3. [X-1, Y, Z], [X, Y-1, Z], and [X, Y, Z-1] are the three “maximally great possible beings.” (CTA, IA)

4. [X-1, Y, Z], [X, Y-1, Z], and [X, Y, Z-1] share the property of “being the GPB.” (TA)

5. Therefore [X-1, Y, Z], [X, Y-1, Z], and [X, Y, Z-1] are God. (Anselm, TA, CT)

As such, Broad’s argument that OA fails on the grounds that God is logically incoherent fails, as God (=df “the GPB”) appears to be a coherent trinity comprised of three beings with the property of “being the GPB.” While the method I have employed in TA is certainly open to question and further explication, for now, *feci quod potui, faciant meliora potentes.*

1. As formulated by Broad, C.D., *Religion, Philosophy and Psychical Research* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953).

2. Distilled from arguments original to Anselm, St., *Anselm’s Basic Writings*, translated by S.W. Deane, 2nd Ed. (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Co., 1962).

3. Outlined with the assistance of Dr. Hestevold from the sentential form

“I. The greatest possible being must have properties X, Y, and Z.

II. (((X & Y & ~Z) v (Y & Z & ~X)) v (Z & X & ~Y)) & ~(X & Y & Z)

III. (X & Y & Z) > (((X & Y & ~Z) v (Y & Z & ~X)) v (Z & X & ~Y))

IV. Therefore, the greatest possible being is logically incoherent.”

derived by the author from the original quotation in Broad.

4. McCloskey, H. J. “God and Evil.” *Philosophical Quarterly* 10: 97-114 (1960).

5. Joyce, G. The Blessed Trinity. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912).