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Problems with 'The Lord of non-Contradiction'

0. Introduction

In this post, I will not be focusing on a blog post or a non-professional apologetical argument. Rather, I will be focusing on an argument in a peer-reviewed academic journal, called *Philosophia Christi* (it is published by the [Evangelical Philosophical Society](#)). The paper is entitled '[The Lord of Non-Contradiction](#)', and the authors are [James Anderson](#) and [Greg Welty](#). They are professional academics, with PhDs in respected institutions (Edinburgh and Oxford, respectively). These guys are proper academics, by any standards. I believe this to be the most philosophically rigorous version of their argument that I have come across.

The argument they present in the paper is a version of the 'argument from logic', in which the existence of God is argued for using the nature of logic as the motivating factor. This is a sophisticated version of the familiar presuppositionalist refrain, and is the sort of thing I imagine Matt Slick would be arguing for had he received a graduate education in philosophy as well as theology. It is an interesting paper, which certainly doesn't fall prey to the usual fallacies that we see repeated over and over again in the non-professional internet apologetics communities. They are presuppositionalists (as far as I can gather), but this is not a presuppositional argument as such.

Despite their obvious qualities as theologians and philosophers, I still see reason to reject the argument, which I will explain here. Before we get to my reasons for criticising the argument, we should have a look at the argument as they present it.

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laws of logic necessarily exist', 'the laws of logic are non-physical', 'the laws of logic are thoughts', and 'the laws of logic are divine thoughts'. Here is how they summarise the argument in their conclusion:

“The laws of logic are necessary truths about truths; they are necessarily true propositions. Propositions are real entities, but cannot be physical entities; they are essentially thoughts. So the laws of logic are necessarily true thoughts. Since they are true in every possible world, they must exist in every possible world. But if there are necessarily existent thoughts, there must be a necessarily existent mind; and if there is a necessarily existent mind, there must be a necessarily existent person. A necessarily existent person must be spiritual in nature, because no physical entity exists necessarily. Thus, if there are laws of logic, there must also be a necessarily existent, personal, spiritual being. The laws of logic imply the existence of God.”
(p. 20)

So we see a plausible looking string of inferences from various claims, each of which has a section in the paper defending it, and often presenting citations to other papers for elaborations. We seem to be moving from simple observations about the nature of the laws of logic, that they are necessary truths, etc, to the claim that they indicate the presence of a divine mind.

Here is the argument from above in something closer to premise/conclusion form. I have had to construct this, as the authors leave the logical form of the argument informal, and in doing so, I have tried to represent the reasoning as we find it above:

1. *The laws of logic are necessarily true propositions.*
2. *Propositions are real entities, but cannot be physical entities; they are essentially thoughts.*
3. *But if there are necessarily existent thoughts, there must be a necessarily existent mind.*

4. *If there is a necessarily existent mind, there must be a necessarily existent person.*

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7. *A necessarily existent, personal, spiritual being is God*
8. *The laws of logic imply the existence of God.*
9. Therefore, God exists.

The final step I have had to add in myself, as Anderson and Welty do not explicitly draw it out as such. They stop their argument at the conditional 'logic implies God', leaving the reader to join the dots. There are some terms that don't quite match up properly in the above (true propositions and real entities, etc), which stop it from being formally valid.

1.1 A more formal version of the argument

Here is a more formal way of thinking about the argument, with the presentation cleaned up a bit, and as a result more stilted:

1. **If something is a law of logic, then it is necessarily true.** (*premise*)
 - 1a. **If something is necessarily true, then it is true all possible worlds.** (*premise*).
 - 1b. **There is something which is a law of logic.** (*premise*)
 - 1c. There is something such that it exists in all possible worlds. (*from 1 and 1b.*)
2. **For everything that exists, it is either a physical thing or a thought.** (*premise*)
 - 2a. If something is a law of logic, then it is either a physical thing or a thought. (*from 1 and 2.*).
 - 2b. **If a thing exists necessarily, then it is not a physical thing.** (*premise*)
 - 2c. If something is a law of logic, then it is not a physical thing. (*from 1 and 2b.*)
 - 2d. If something is a law of logic, then it is a thought. (*from 2a. and 2c.*)

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3. If there is a thought, then there is a mind (of which it is a part). (premise)

3a. There is a thought and there is a mind (of which it is part). (from 2e. and 3)

3b. There is something such that it is is a thought and that it is necessary that it exists, and that there is a mind (of which it is part). (from 2f., 3.)

4. If something is a mind, then it is a person. (premise)

4a. There is a person. (from 3a and 4)

4b. There is something such that it is is a thought and that it is necessary that it exists, and that there is a mind (of which it is part) and this is a person. (from 3b. and 4)

5. If it is necessary that there is a person, that person must be spiritual. (premise)

5a. It is necessary that there is a person such that they are spiritual. (from 4b and 5).

6. If the laws of logic exist, then it is necessary that there is person who is spiritual. (1a and 5a)

7. If it is necessary that there is a spiritual person, that person is God. (premise)

8. Therefore, God exists (from 5a. and 7)

The argument presented above is valid. It has the advantage of showing what the various inferences are and how many assumptions need to be given in order for the argument to work. I will present two initial problems, before going into more detail about three more serious problems.

1.2 Initial problems

There are two initial problems with the argument. Firstly, the conclusion arrived at is actually weaker than 'God exists' and secondly there is a false dichotomy involved in

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The first problem is in premise 3, the inference from the existence of thoughts to the existence of a mind. Take a particular law, say the law of non-contradiction. We can run through the argument up to premise 3 and show that there is a thought, then we deduce the existence of a mind from it; call that mind 'M1'. But now run the argument again, this time with the law of excluded middle as the example. Once again, when we arrive at step 3, we deduce the existence of a mind; call it 'M2'. The question is, does $M1 = M2$? It doesn't follow logically that they are the same mind, and they could be distinct minds for all the truth of the premises entail. If so, then we would end up with *two Gods* at the end. Given that there are three laws of logic considered in the paper, Anderson and Welty's argument is compatible with there being *three non-identical necessarily existing minds*, or Gods, which would be polytheism. The argument is not specific to laws of logic, but could use any necessary proposition, such as those of mathematics, meaning that we could be looking at an infinite number of minds.

In order to avoid this, we would have to add in as an additional premise that in all cases such as this, $M1 = M2$. But this seems rather implausible. Now the argument basically says, 'laws of logic are thoughts, and so are all necessary propositions, *and they are all had by the same mind*, and that mind is God'. The addition of this premise is *ad hoc*, meaning it has no intuitive support apart from the fact that it gets us to the conclusion. For it to be considered at all plausible, there should be some independent reason given to think that it is true. Anderson and Welty consider something close to this objection:

"It might be objected that the necessary existence of certain thoughts entails only that, necessarily, *some* minds exist." (p.19)

However, they cash this out with a scenario in which there are multiple contingent minds, and then produce a counter-argument against this. They seem to miss the possibility that there are multiple necessary minds (i.e. polytheism), and as such their counter-argument misses my point entirely.

At the moment, even if you grant all the premises and assumptions, the argument establishes only that *at least one god* exists, which is presumably a lot weaker than the conclusion they intend to establish.

1.2.2 False dichotomy

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and as such there is no reason to accept premise 2. One *might* want to argue that everything has to be in one of two categories, but then one has to say something about difficult cases. We often say things like 'there is an opportunity for a promotion'. On the face of it, we are quantifying existentially over opportunities. So opportunities exist. Are they physical things? Are they thoughts? Take haircuts as another example. Are they physical things? Are they thoughts? We could come up with some way of categorising things such that opportunities are a kind of mental entity, and haircuts are a type of physical entity, or explain away the apparent existential quantification as a mere turn of phrase, but the point is that it is not straightforward to merely claim that everything is either mental or physical, and any argument which relies on this as a basic assumption inherits all the difficulties associated with it.

However, if I left things like that, then I think I would be seriously misrepresenting their actual argument. In reality, this premise is a product of trying to stick to the wording of what they say in the quoted section above. In the paper, they actually provide a positive argument for why laws of logic have to be considered as thoughts. So we could just change premise 2 to 'the laws of logic are thoughts', and have it supported independently by their sub-argument. I will come to their sub-argument, that the laws of logic have to be thoughts, in section 3 below.

In what follows, I will look at three aspects of their argument where I think there are weaknesses. These aspects will be with a) the claim that the laws of logic are necessary (part 2), b) with the inference from intentionality to mentality (part 3), and c) with a modal shift from necessary thoughts to necessary minds (part 4). They are not presented in order of importance, or any particular order.

2. The Necessary Truth Hypothesis

The first premise of the argument as stated above ('If something is a law of logic, then it is necessarily true') is ambiguous over the variety of necessity involved. There are several likely contenders for the type of modality involved: epistemic modality, metaphysical modality, logical modality. I consider each in turn.

2.1 Epistemic Modality

Anderson and Welty are clearly not attempting to make an epistemological claim

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safe to assume that when they say the laws of logic are necessary, they do not merely mean epistemologically necessary.

2.2 Metaphysical Modality

More likely, when Anderson and Welty say the laws of logic are necessary, they mean the laws of logic are *metaphysically* necessary. They are fairly explicit about this:

“...we will argue for a substantive *metaphysical* relationship between the laws of logic and the existence of God ... In other words, we will argue that there are laws of logic *because* God exists; indeed, there are laws of logic *only* because God exists.” (p. 1)

Nonetheless, on this reading, I find the reasons they offer for thinking the laws of logic are necessary rather strange. They say,

“...we cannot imagine the possibility of the law of noncontradiction being false” (p. 6),

And in a footnote they say that they

“...rely on the widely-shared intuition that conceivability is a reliable guide to possibility” (ibid)

The suggestion then is that the reason for thinking that non-contradiction is metaphysically necessary because *they cannot imagine true contradictions*. I want to bring up three issues with this methodology:

1. Conceivability is often a poor guide to metaphysical possibility
2. The falsity of non-classical laws is conceivable
3. The falsity of excluded middle is conceivable

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physical modalities have been recognised to be properly distinct from one another. One could easily adapt those famous examples to show the independence of metaphysical possibility and conceivability.

For example, one might not be able to conceive of the morning star being identical to the evening star (if you were an ancient Babylonian astrologer, etc), but we now know that their identity *is* metaphysically necessary. Again, one might be able to conceive of the mind existing without the brain, but it is quite plausible their independence is metaphysically impossible. Kant famously thought Euclidian geometry was a synthetic a priori truth; one must presuppose Euclidean geometry to be true when we think about the world, which would make its falsity *inconceivable*. Yet our world *is* non-Euclidian. It took pioneering and brilliant mathematicians to imagine what geometry would be like in this case, but once their work has filtered down into mainstream educated society, this otherwise inconceivable metaphysical truth has become entirely conceivable.

A somewhat similar situation is now the case with non-contradiction. Graham Priest is a very widely respected, if controversial, logician and metaphysician who has argued for the thesis that there are true contradictions. One may disagree with his methodology and conclusions, and I am in no way asserting that dialethism is anywhere as near as well supported as non-euclidian geometry, but it seems odd to rule out all the work on dialethism and paraconsistent logic simply on the basis that one cannot conceive of it being true. It could *quite easily* be true regardless of your particular inability to conceive of it, as history seems to show.

To push this even further, it is worth noting that conceivability (like epistemic modality, and unlike metaphysical possibility) is *agent-dependent*, in the sense that what is, and is not, conceivable varies from agent to agent. I may be able to conceive of something you cannot. To take an example of an agent who cannot conceive of a thesis, and then to couple that with the claim that 'conceivability is a reliable guide to possibility', seems to be ad hoc. Had we started with someone else's outlook (say Graham Priest's), we would be using exactly the same argument to reach the opposite conclusion. The strength of the argument then would depend entirely on the choice of agent.

Anderson and Welty cannot conceive of true contradictions. But should we be consulting *their* notion of conceivability when trying to draw metaphysical conclusions? If we

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ample). Ideally, you would want an agent who's idea of what is conceivable supervened *perfectly* on what is in fact metaphysically possible. The extent to which they differed, for some particular agent, is the extent to which conceivability, for that particular agent, is *not* a 'reliable guide to (metaphysical) possibility'. Whether something is metaphysically possible could be determined by consulting whether it was conceivable for a given agent *only on the assumption that what is conceivable for that agent supervenes on what is in fact metaphysically possible*. But this means that what is relevant here is simply whether or not contradictions are in fact metaphysically possible, as this would itself determine whether it was conceivable for that agent; not the other way round. So we have been taken on a long and winding route, via the notion of conceivability, which ultimately is seen to be relevant only to the extent that it maps to metaphysical possibility, to get to this destination.

So, is Anderson and Welty's inability to imagine what true contradictions would be like actually any kind of evidence that true contradictions are metaphysically impossible? The answer is: only if what they can conceive of matches perfectly (at least with respect to this issue) what is in fact metaphysically possible. We have to assume that they are right for the inference to be seen as valid. And we have been given *no reason* to think that this is the case. Until we are, we should draw no conclusions about what is metaphysically possible based on what *they* are able to conceive of. If they could produce some reason to think that what they can conceive of always tracks what is metaphysically possible, or at least successfully tracks what is metaphysically possible in this case, then we would have been given some reason. We have been given no reason to buy the claim that true contradictions are metaphysically impossible.

There might be other reasons to think that contradictions are metaphysically impossible of course, but they are not mentioned in this paper. So the argument as stated has an unjustified premise, it seems to me.

2.2.2 Conceivability and non-classical laws

In the introduction to their paper, Anderson and Welty attempt to pre-empt a response about alternative laws of logic by saying that their argument is not dependent in any way on the choice of these particular laws. They say:

“Readers who favor other examples [of logical laws] AMI should

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ing metaphysically necessary) does depend for its plausibility on the choice of laws, in contrast to the claim above. What we are being asked to accept is the inconceivability of the falsity of the laws of logic. I suggest that this far more likely to be considered true if we start with *classical* laws, than if we had substituted in other non-classical laws at the beginning. For example, would Anderson and Welty be prepared to defend that the falsity of the laws of *quantum logic* is also inconceivable? Or equally inconceivable as the falsity of the classical laws? The laws of quantum logic may well be true or false (at least from my perspective), and so their falsity is certainly conceivable to me.

Even if it turns out that they are big enthusiasts for quantum logic as well as for classical logic, finding each equally intuitive (which seems unlikely), there will surely be some far-out system of logic which has some law they find down-right implausible, for which its falsity is *entirely conceivable* to them. Then, their argument would *not* work if we substituted the laws from these logical systems instead.

This would mean that, to this extent then, their argument is only an argument for the sorts of logical systems *they happen to find plausible*. Thus, if a logic happens to be the one that God thinks, which also happens to be entirely *implausible* to Anderson and Welty (for which they find the falsity of its principles entirely conceivable), they would have failed to articulate an argument here which established a route from logic to God.

2.2.3 Excluded middle

The general argument for the laws of logic being metaphysically necessary is that their falsity is inconceivable. Here is Anderson and Welty:

“Not only are the laws of logic *truths*, they are *necessary truths*. This is just to say that they are true propositions that could not have been false. The proposition that the Allies won the Second World War is a contingent truth; it could have been false, since it was at least *possible* for the Allies to lose the war. But the laws of logic are not contingent truths. While we can easily imagine the possibility of the Allies losing the war, and thus of the proposition that the Allies won the Second World War being false, we cannot imagine the possibility of the Law of

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It is telling that Anderson and Welty use the law of non-contradiction as their example here, as it is admittedly rather difficult to get one's head around the idea of it being false (none other than David Lewis famously claimed not to be able to do so).

However, this reasoning does not really work for the law of excluded middle. What we have to do to imagine that this is the case is to imagine that there is a proposition for which neither it nor its negation is true. Aristotle makes various comments in *De Interpretatione IX*, which he (seems to) make an argument according to which statements about the future concerning contingent events, such as 'Tomorrow there will be a sea battle', should be considered *neither true nor false*. It follows from this that the law of excluded middle would be false, at least for future contingents such as this. There is controversy as to whether Aristotle was making this argument, with the issue being one of the longest logico-metaphysical debates in the history of philosophy (being discussed by Arabic logicians, medieval logicians, and modern logicians), and there is nothing like a consensus that Aristotle was correct in making this argument, if indeed he was actually making it. However, the thesis he was putting forward (that future contingents are neither true nor false) is *clearly conceivable* by a great many philosophers. Indeed, it is a textbook philosophical position.

So the argument was that the laws of logic are metaphysically necessary, and the support for this is that the falsity of the laws of logic is inconceivable. Yet, while it is perhaps true for the law of non-contradiction, this seems plainly false for the law of excluded middle. It is patently conceivable that it is false. Thus, the support for the laws of logic being metaphysically necessary only covers two of the three laws they themselves provide.

If we were to respond by dropping excluded middle just to get around this problem, that would be ad hoc. To respond to this, they should explain how the falsity of excluded middle is in fact inconceivable, or provide another reason for thinking that it is metaphysically necessary.

2.3 Possible worlds

Anderson and Welty attempt to provide additional support for the metaphysical neces-

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possible world—albeit a very chaotic and confusing world—in which the Law of Non-Contradiction is false. If so, we would simply invite you to reflect on whether you really can conceive of a possible world in which contradictions abound. What would that look like? Can you imagine an alternate reality in which, for example, trees both exist and do not exist?” (p. 6).

Firstly, for the law of non-contradiction to be false, there only has to be *one* true contradiction, and it is not required that contradictions ‘abound’. I think I could conceive of a possible world where there is a contradiction; and it might be the actual world. Perhaps the liar sentence (‘this sentence is false’) is an example. Maybe in the actual world everything else is classical apart from the liar sentence. If so I have conceived of a world in which the law of non-contradiction is false. This does not mean that ‘contradictions abound’, and we do not have to imagine trees both existing and not existing. I seem to have met their challenge.

Remember, I do not have to show that the liar sentence is *in fact* both true and false at the actual world. All I have to do is be *able to conceive of a world* in which the law of non-contradiction is false. It seems to me that, given the work of dialethists on this area, it is conceivable.

Perhaps sensing the need for further argument, they say that contradictory worlds cannot be conceived of, because possible worlds are *by definition* consistent:

“The criterion of logical consistency—conformity to the law of noncontradiction—is surely the first criterion we apply when determining whether a world is possible or impossible. A world in which some proposition is both true and false, in which some fact both obtains and does not obtain, is by definition an impossible world. The notion of noncontradiction lies at the core of our understanding of possibility.” (p. 6 – 7)

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because they are true in all possible worlds, but laws of logic are true in all possible worlds because the laws of logic are necessary.

I think the direction of travel from possible worlds to possibilities is misguided. Anderson and Welty appear to be under the impression there is some meta-physically significant sense in which we can *check* possible worlds to see if they really are possible or not; as if possible worlds were conceptually prior to possibilities. The picture painted is that there is a sort of a priori rationalistic access we have to the set of possible worlds which we can consult in order to find out about what is really possible. This idea is actually warned against by Kripke in *Naming and Necessity*. There he argues against the identification of a prioricity and necessity:

“I think people have thought that these two things [a prioricity and necessity – AM] must mean the same of these reasons: ... if something not only happens to be true in the actual world but is also true in all possible worlds, then, of course, just by running through all the possible worlds in our heads, we ought to be able with enough effort to see, if a statement is necessary, that it is necessary, and thus know it a priori. But really this is not so obviously feasible at all.” (p. 38)

It also seems to fly in the face of Kripke’s famous telescope remark:

“One thinks, in this picture, of a possible world as if it were like a foreign country. ... it seems to me not to be the right way of thinking about the possible worlds. A possible world isn’t a distant country that we are coming across, or viewing through a telescope.... A possible world is given by the descriptive conditions we associate with it” (Kripke, Naming and Necessity, p 43-44).

I think, apparently in contrast to A&W, possible worlds are just a way of cashing out our notion(s) of possibility. If we are thinking about what is logically possible (with classical logic in mind), then when constructing the possible worlds we make sure to get

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However, different notions of logical consequence lead to different constructions of worlds. In intuitionist logic, where we want to have mathematical propositions for which there is no formal proof to be neither true nor false, the 'possible worlds' (or 'constructions') are not maximal. They may simply leave both p and $\neg p$ out altogether. Equally, for a dialetheist who believes there are true contradictions in the actual world, where both p and $\neg p$ are true, the notion of 'possible world' leaves out the notion of consistency (or, if you prefer, the dialetheist includes both possible worlds and 'impossible worlds' in his semantics). In the actual practice of formal and philosophical logic, one normally starts with a notion of logical consequence (or of 'laws') and then uses logical consequence to cash out what the appropriate semantic apparatus will be like. On this understanding (the usual understanding), one cannot use the fact that maximal and consistent possible worlds do not have contradictions to tell us which logical laws to accept as true, as we need an idea of which logical laws to accept prior to accepting anything about possible worlds. So the circularity of A&W's reasoning here is completely avoidable. They just need to appreciate the role possible worlds semantics plays in philosophical logic. If they were able to see the restrictions they put on possible worlds (maximal, consistent, etc) are not mandatory, they would be able to more readily conceive of how a possible world could be inconsistent or non-maximal. Anderson and Welty appear to resemble the 17th century geometer who cannot imagine parallel lines ever meeting and concludes the meeting of parallel lines is metaphysically impossible. Thus, Anderson and Welty's failure to imagine what non-classical worlds would be like seems to be a limitation on their part and should not be used as a support for their argument.

In sum, Anderson and Welty provide two reasons for thinking LOL are metaphysically necessary: (i) their falsity is inconceivable and (ii) they are true in every possible world. We have shown (i) provides flimsy support for their subconclusions and (ii) is based on several confusions concerning philosophical logic and possible worlds.

2.4 Logical Necessity

Finally, the claim could instead be read as saying the laws of logic are logically necessary truths. In some sense, one cannot deny the laws of logic are logically necessary truths, but this sense is trivial. Usually, the claim that p is logically necessary, with respect to a system S , simply means the truth of p does not violate any logical law of S .

When n is an instance of a logical law of S the claim becomes vacuous. If we said ' n is

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of platonic objects, or of God. Logical necessity is more like the way that statements about numbers depend on which number system you have in mind; is there a number between 1 and 2? No, if you mean 'natural number', yes if you mean a more complex notion of number. To ask 'but is there really a number there?' is arguably not a sensible question at all. If this is correct, then there may be no more to the notion of logical necessity than 'necessary given system S', and as such each logical law is true in its own system and (in general) is not in another system.

In sum, Anderson and Welty claim that the laws of logic are necessary truths. They do not seem to be making a claim about epistemological necessity; their arguments for a claim about metaphysical necessity are highly dubious; the claim that it is about logical necessity makes it vacuous. Thus, either this part of the argument is unsupported, or trivial.

3. Propositions are intentional

The most controversial aspect of Anderson and Welty's argument is the move from the laws of logic being propositions, through them being intentional, to them being mental (or thoughts). In order to see what is at stake here, we need to be clear about both intentionality and propositions.

Anderson and Welty's argument at this stage seems to be of the following form:

1. All propositions are intentional.
2. Everything intentional is mental.
3. Therefore, all propositions are mental.

This little argument is clearly valid, so if the premises are also true, we would have to accept the conclusion.

I think there are reasons to doubt both premises. More specifically, there is reason to doubt that the arguments presented in Anderson and Welty's paper support these premises.

3.1 Intentionality

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“Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction towards an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired, and so on.”

(Psychology from an empirical standpoint, *Franz Brentano, 1874, p 68*)

It has become customary to call the following claim ‘Brentano’s Thesis’:

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x is intentional iff x is mental

As this is a biconditional claim, it can be split into two conditionals:

1. Everything intentional is mental
2. Everything mental is intentional

It is standard for philosophers to argue that there are mental states which are non-intentional (Searle’s example is a vague and undirected feeling of anxiety), and thus that the second condition in Brentano’s thesis is false.

Anderson and Welty say that they are really concerned with the first of these conditions, and that

“...the argument is unaffected if it turns out that there are some non-intentional mental states” (p. 17)

What they need to do is show that there is nothing which is both intentional and non-mental. There seem to be counter-examples here though. Firstly, sentences of natural language seem to be intentional, in that they are about things. The sentence ‘Quine was a philosopher’ is about Quine. Yet that sentence is not itself mental. I can think about

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intentional vehicles for communicating intentional thoughts. Anderson and Welty want to say that, while there may be instances of derivatively intentional phenomena (like sentences), anything which is *inherently* intentional is mental.

There are other approaches which hold that there are inherently intentional non-mental phenomena, such as that of Fred Dretske, according to which intentionality is best understood as the property of containing information. So an object is intentional if it contains some information. The content of the information is what makes the object about something else. So, an example is that there is no smoke without fire. In this sense, the smoke contains information about the presence of fire. Other examples stated on the Stanford page include:

“A fingerprint carries information about the identity of the human being whose finger was imprinted. Spots on a human face carry information about a disease. The height of the column of mercury in a thermometer carries information about the temperature. A gas-gauge on the dashboard of a car carries information about the amount of fuel in the car tank. The position of a needle in a galvanometer carries information about the flow of electric current. A compass carries information about the location of the North pole.”

All these objects are not mental, yet they carry information about things, and so are intentional in Dretske's sense of the word. If this approach is correct, then Anderson and Welty's inference is blocked (as there are things which are non-mental yet intentional), and with it the rest of the argument is blocked. You could not argue from the laws of logic being propositions, to them being intentional, to them being thoughts, to them being the thoughts of God. The jump from being intentional to being mental would be invalid if Dretske's approach, or one like it, were correct.

There are problems with Dretske's account of intentionality, as you would expect from a philosophical theory, but if Anderson and Welty want to advance the thesis that all intentional things are mental, they need to provide counter-arguments to proposals such as Dretske's.

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“Following Brentano, Crane argues (against some contemporary philosophers of mind) that intentionality, properly understood, is not only a sufficient condition of the mental but also a necessary condition” (p. 17, *footnote*)

If this were right, then they would have some support for their claim that everything which is intentional is mental. However, I think they are using Crane to argue for a thesis that his paper does not support, and I will explain why I think this.

Crane’s main concern in his paper is to deal with intentionality being a necessary condition for being mental (i.e. that everything mental is intentional). The sufficiency claim (that everything intentional is mental), which is the only thing that Anderson and Welty are really concerned with for their argument, is only tangentially addressed by Crane in that paper. Crane’s motivation, as he explains, is to account for why Brentano would have asserted his thesis if there were so many seemingly obvious counter-examples to it:

“If it is so obvious that Brentano’s thesis is false, why did Brentano propose it? If a moment’s reflection on one’s states of mind refutes the thesis that all mental states are intentional, then why would anyone (including Brentano, Husserl, Sartre and their followers) think otherwise? Did Brentano have a radically different inner life from the inner lives of contemporary philosophers? Or was the originator of phenomenology spectacularly inattentive to phenomenological facts, rather as Freud is supposed to have been a bad analyst? Or—surely more plausibly—did Brentano mean something different by ‘intentionality’ than what many contemporary philosophers mean?” (*Crane, Intentionality as the mark of the mental, p. 2*)

He says that he is not specifically interested in the historical and exegetical question of what Brentano and his followers actually said, but rather with the following question:

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Thus, when Crane talks about 'intentionality', we should remember that he does not mean "what many contemporary philosophers mean" by the term. Rather, he has a specific aim in mind: to cash out what intentionality *would* be like if it was, by definition, the 'mark of the mental', i.e. not what intentionality is like, but what it would be like if Brentano's thesis was true.

Most of the paper is directed at supposed examples of mental phenomena that are non-intentional, such as sense perception and undirected emotion. He gives an account of what it would mean to consider these as intentional. This effort is being addressed to defend the first part of Brentano's thesis (that everything mental is intentional).

Although the focus of the paper is on the first part of Brentano's thesis, Crane does directly confront the second part, i.e. the notion that everything intentional is mental:

"I have been defending the claim that all mental phenomena exhibit intentionality. Now I want to return to the other part of Brentano's thesis, the claim that intentionality is exclusive to the mental domain. This will give me the opportunity to air some speculations about why we should be interested in the idea of a mark of the mental." (*Crane, Intentionality as the mark of the mental, p. 14*)

Crane addresses the Chisholm-Quine idea that sentences are intentional and non-mental phenomena. Chisholm (1957) proposed a criterion whereby we can tell if a sentence is intentional or not, which is basically if it is used in non-extensional (i.e. in intensional) contexts. Crane calls this the 'linguistic criterion'. In response to this, Crane recommends that the position he is defending (intentionalism) should reject the linguistic criterion altogether. I will quote his reasons for recommending such a position in full:

"And given the way I have been proceeding in this paper, [the rejection of the linguistic criterion] should not be suprising. Intentionality, like consciousness, is one of the concepts which we use in an elucidation of what it is to have a mind. On this conception of intentionality, to

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primitive forms of intentionality which are only remotely connected with conscious mental life—say, the intentionality of the information-processing which goes on in our brains. It is rather to emphasise the priority of intentionality as a phenomenological notion. So intentionalists will reject the linguistic criterion of intentionality precisely because the criterion will count phenomena as intentional which are clearly not mental.” (*Crane, Intentionality as the mark of the mental, p. 15*)

Thus we can see here that Crane rejects the criteria by which one says that some sentences are intentional, not because sentences are only ‘derivatively’ intentional, but “*precisely because the criterion will count phenomena as intentional which are clearly not mental*“. Ultimately, on Crane’s picture of intentionality, sentences are not intentional **because they are not mental**.

When it comes to propositions, it is actually quite controversial and non-standard to consider propositions to be mental (i.e. to be thoughts). Just like sentences, they are usually considered to be intentional (in the standard sense, in that they are *about* things) yet not mental. Anderson and Welty point to Crane as someone who has defended the thesis that everything intentional is mental. Yet, when we come to consider Crane’s special sense of intentionality, we see the author recommending that we should resist applying it to propositions just because we would end up classifying “*phenomena as intentional which are clearly not mental*“. Crane doesn’t deduce mentality from things that are otherwise obviously intentional; rather he ensures that everything intentional is mental by restricting the application of intentionality to only things which are obviously mental. It is a recommendation to change the meaning of intentional to get the desired result. If Anderson and Welty want to say that the reason they have for claiming that propositions are mental is that they are intentional *in Crane’s sense*, then it is doubtful that this is true. It is doubtful that propositions are intentional in this sense *precisely because they are not obviously mental*. We could only use Crane’s sense of intentionality if we already thought that propositions were mental. *Prima facie*, it seems that they are only as intentional as sentences, and if sentences are deemed non-intentional for Crane, then so should propositions. Thus, I see no benefit for Anderson and Welty for pointing us in the direction of Crane here.

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Let's say we grant that the laws of logic are (metaphysically/logically) necessary, and that they exist in every (metaphysically/logically) possible world. Let's also grant that they are inherently intentional, and that they are therefore thoughts. What we would have established at this juncture is that *there are some necessarily existing thoughts*, which are constitutive of the laws of logic (and all other metaphysically necessary propositions). From this, Anderson and Welty draw the conclusion that this implies the presence of a divine mind:

“But now an obvious question arises. Just *whose* thoughts are the laws of logic? There are no more thoughts without minds than there is smoke without fire ... In any case, the laws of logic *couldn't* be our thoughts—or the thoughts of any other contingent being for that matter—for as we've seen, the laws of logic exist *necessarily* if they exist at all. For any human person S, S might not have existed, along with S's thoughts. The Law of Non-Contradiction, on the other hand, *could not* have failed to exist—otherwise it could have failed to be true. If the laws of logic are necessarily existent thoughts, they can only be the thoughts of a *necessarily existent mind*.” (p. 19)

So the inference from thoughts to a mind is as follows:

1. There are no thoughts without minds.
2. Necessarily there are thoughts.
3. Therefore, necessarily there is a mind.

The scope of the necessity claim in the conclusion needs to be cashed out properly, for us to be able to judge whether the inference is valid. The precise logical form of the argument is not entirely clear to me, but here is my best shot:

1. $(\exists x (Tx) \rightarrow \exists y (My))$ (If there is a thought, then there is a mind)
2. $\Box(\exists x (Tx))$ (Necessarily, there is a thought)
3. $\Box(\exists x (Mx))$ (Therefore, necessarily, there is a mind)

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sary mind (*de re* necessity), rather than it being necessary that there something which is a mind (*de dicto* necessity).

Here is an illustration of the difference between them. It is necessary that there is someone who is the oldest person alive. Say someone, let's call them Raj, is the oldest person alive. It is not necessary *of Raj* that he is the oldest person, because he could die and the title of oldest person would pass to someone else. It is necessary that *someone* has the title (at least so long as there are people), but there is nobody of whom it is necessary that *they* have the title.

A&W want to say that there is a mind (God's mind) of which it necessarily exists, which is a *de re* claim, and not just that it is necessary that *some mind or other* exists, which is a *de dicto* claim. The difference is between $\Box(\exists x (Mx))$ ('It is necessary that there is a mind'), and $(\exists x \Box(Mx))$ ('There is a necessary mind').

If we change their argument to put the *de re* conclusion in that they want, it becomes the following:

1. $(\exists x (Tx) \rightarrow \exists y (Mx))$
2. $\Box(\exists x (Tx))$
3. $(\exists x \Box(Mx))$

The problem is that 3 does not follow from 1 and 2. For an illustration of the counterexample (where premise 1 and 2 are true, but this *de re* reading of the conclusion is false), consider the following:

It may be that each possible world has its own unique mind, which thinks the laws of logic. This would mean that premise 1 is true, as whenever there is thought, there is a mind; and it would mean that premise 2 is true, as there is thought that exists in every possible world (specifically, the laws of logic). However, on this model, no mind exists at more than one world; each logic-thinking mind is contingent. So, ' $\Box(\exists x (Mx))$ ' is true, in that at every world there is a mind, but ' $(\exists x \Box(Mx))$ ' is false, in that there isn't a thing which is a mind in every world.

Anderson and Welty do anticipate this response:

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one or more contingent minds, and those minds necessarily produce certain thoughts (among which are the laws of logic). Since those thoughts are produced in every possible world, they enjoy necessary existence.” (p. 19, footnote 31)

This is essentially exactly the issue laid out above. They are saying that the inference to the *de dicto* conclusion might be seen as invalid, on the basis of a model in which there are multiple contingent minds. This is how my counter-example above worked; it involved each world having its own unique contingent mind.

They have two responses to such a move:

“One problem with this suggestion is that thoughts belong essentially to the minds that produce them. Your thoughts necessarily belong to you. We could not have had your thoughts (except in the weaker sense that we could have thoughts with the same content as your thoughts, which presupposes a distinction between human thoughts and the content of those thoughts, e.g., propositions). Consequently, the thoughts of contingent minds must be themselves contingent. Another problem, less serious but still significant, is that this alternative scenario violates the principle of parsimony.” (p. 19-20, *ibid*)

To begin with we have the claim that “*thoughts belong essentially to the minds that produce them*”. So I have *this* particular thought about how lovely the weather is today. While you may also be thinking that the weather is lovely today, you are not literally having the same thought as me; rather you are having a different thought, even if it has the same content. Thus, this thought is had by me (and only me) in every world in which it exists. So being a thought of mine is an essential property of that thought. Because I am a contingent being, and do not exist in every possible world, it follows that there are worlds in which my particular thought about how lovely the weather is today also does not exist. Thus, given that thoughts are essentially of the minds that think them, contingent beings can only have contingent thoughts.

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However, while I find all this quite agreeable, there still seems to be a problem here, although I do find this quite hard to put into words completely clearly, and maybe it is something that could be cleared up with a little more detail on the ontology of how the laws of logic relate to God's thoughts on A&W's part. Anyway, here is how I see it.

The distinction between the thought and the content of the thought is that the former cannot be shared across minds (I cannot have the same thought as you), while the latter can be (I can have a thought with the same content as yours). This, it seems to me, generates a little problem for the divine conceptualist. It seems like the categories of thought and content are mutually exclusive; if I think of my coffee mug, then the thought is not the content of the thought. If I think about the thought I just had about the coffee mug, then my previous thought (about the mug) is the content of a new thought (about the thought about the mug). It seems unintelligible that one and the same thought could be the content of itself. Self-reflection, it seems, is hierarchical, not circular. Call this '*the principle of the Distinctness of Thought from Content*' (or PDTC). If PDTC is true, then it is impossible for a thought to be the content of itself.

Of course, there is the discussion in *Metaphysics* about God being thought that thinks thought. The idea is that God, the pure actuality, has to be thinking which has itself as it's own object of thought. Aristotle seems to anticipate something like the PDTC, when he says the following:

"[God's] Mind thinks itself, if it is that which is best; and its thinking is a thinking of thinking.

Yet it seems that knowledge and perception and opinion and understanding are always of something else, and only incidentally of themselves. And further, if to think is not the same as to be thought, in respect of which does goodness belong to thought? for the act of thinking and the object of thought have not the same essence.

The answer is that in some cases the knowledge is the object. In the productive sciences, if we disregard the matter, the substance, i.e. the

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they will be the same, and the act of thinking will be one with the object of thought.” (Aristotle, Metaphysics, book 12, 1074b-1075a)

So the claim is that the divine mind thinks itself. Then in the second paragraph the objection is posed that thoughts are always about something distinct from themselves. The ‘answer’ provided by Aristotle is that “in the speculative sciences the formula or the act of thinking is the object”. Logic certainly counts as an example of a speculative science (par excellence), and so it seems that Aristotle’s claim is that when God thinks about logic, his thought is identical to the object of the thought. If this is the case, Aristotle presents no argument for it (at least not that I know of). And it seems quite strange, if taken to be the claim that when one thinks about logic, the thought is the content of the thought. It seems quite clear that when I think of the laws of logic, they are the content of my thought, and not the thought itself.

Here is an argument for my claim:

1. If p can be thought by a mind m and a mind m' , where $m \neq m'$, then p is the content of their thought. (Contents of thoughts can be shared by minds)
2. If t is a thought had by m , then t cannot be had by any mind m' , where $m \neq m'$. (Thoughts cannot be shared by minds)
3. Two people can both think of the law of non-contradiction.
4. Therefore, the law of non-contradiction can be the content of thoughts. (from 1 + 3, modus ponens)
5. Therefore, the law of non-contradiction cannot be a thought. (from 2 + 4, modus tollens)

The first two premises of this argument make the distinction between thought and contents of thoughts made by A&W above, and the third just says that two people can both think the LnC. It follows that the LnC cannot be a thought.

For the divine conceptualism of A&W, the law of non-contradiction is ultimately supposed to *be* God’s thought. So take the law of non-contradiction, ‘LnC’, and some thought had by God, T . If $\text{LnC} = T$, then (by the PDTC) it is not the content of T . But what is the content of T ? What is God thinking *about* when he has the thought T which is the law of non-contradiction? The obvious answer would be that God is thinking about proposi-

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But why is it then that T is LnC, if the content of T is something other than that propositions cannot be true with their negations? Nothing else is relevant! It seems incredible to consider that the content of T is (say) this coffee mug, while also insisting that T is the LnC. If the content of T, whatever it is, is not the mutual exclusivity of propositions and their negations, then it can only be arbitrarily connected with LnC. This makes it a mystery, ultimately, why it has anything to do with LnC, let alone *being* the LnC.

The question is: in virtue of what could a thought T, whose content is irrelevant to the LnC, be said to *be* the LnC?

There are three ways out of this problem, it seems to me.

One is to bite the bullet and say that God thinks something with completely arbitrary content, and this just is the LnC. It is a hard pill to swallow.

The next escape route would be to say that the LnC is in fact the *content* of T. This explains why it is that I can also think about LnC; both me and God think about the same thing. However, this option is rather like the horn of the Euthyphro dilemma that says that God likes good actions because they are good. If God has a thought which has LnC as its content, then the LnC is not to be associated with God's thought any more than it is if I have a thought with the LnC as its content. The significance of God in the equation has been completely removed. It seems that the central claim of a divine conceptualist has been undermined if we take this route.

The only other escape route I can see here is to deny that LnC cannot be both T and the content of T. Perhaps when it comes to God's thoughts, they can be both thought and content together. So the LnC is the content of God's thought (i.e. he is thinking about how propositions and their negations cannot both be true) and that this thought *is* the law itself. It may seem unintelligible for us humans to have such a thought, but maybe this is how God thinks.

The problem with this route, it seems to me, is that it undermines the analogy between divine thoughts and mere human thoughts. When the divine conceptualist says that laws of logic are divine *thoughts*, we take it that the claim is saying that they are thoughts that are at least a somewhat similar to human thoughts. This seems to be required for the argument from propositions being intentional in section 3 (above)

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thoughts to include the seemingly unintelligible idea of a thought being at once its own content, the universal claim is also undermined. Consider the claim spelled out in full:

“Everything intentional is mental, and under the term ‘mental’ I include things which are very unlike human thoughts because they have properties which are unintelligible if applied to human thoughts (such as a human thought which is its own content)”

Where we have arrived at, is a destination where the central claim of the divine conceptualist is that the laws of logic are to be associated with some aspect of God, which in some sense resembles human thoughts, but that in another sense is nothing like human thoughts. Saying that the laws of logic are thoughts *at all* on this picture seems quite a difficult thing to maintain.

5. Conclusion

It seems to me that there are quite a few problems with the argument presented in The Lord of Non-Contradiction. Some of them are quite subtle, like the final one concerning the precise relationship between the laws and the thoughts of God, and it is entirely possible that they could be cleared up. Some of them are quite technical, such as the details of how possible worlds are cashed out in the metaphysics of modality, and A&W could be forgiven for not realising them. Some of them, I suggest, are quite a lot more serious, such as the inference from intentionality to mentality. I don't see this being fixed up with a little revision or by spelling something out a bit more clearly. It is utterly foundational to the argument and it seems to me that it is just fallacious.

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8 thoughts on “Problems with ‘The Lord of non-Contradiction’”



David Eriol Hickman

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At this point they do not explicate what a thought actually is, and still seem to imply that 'thoughts' are 'things'.

I dispute this and would insist that thought, and all other mental phenomena, are not actually 'things' of any sort at all. Rather, they are actions or activity. Activity of the brain.

Everything we know about thoughts and the brain support this, and we have No counter example of a non physical/biological based mind that is distinguishable from the imaginary.

Which is to say that thoughts do not pre-exist a mind, thoughts arise from the mental activity of a physical brain.

That aside, they seem to conflate 'our thinking of' (ie the mental act) with what that mental act is 'about'. They confuse the 'Terrain' of externality (in which things are as they are and are not as they are not due simply to Physics – not metaphysics or any mental act whatsoever) with the 'Map' that our thinking attempts to model.

Physics does not require a mind, and things do not need to be told to be what they are. A mind is only needed to label and conceptualise observation.

If a tree falls in a forest and there are no minds to think about it, it is still a fallen tree.

Transcendentals are not 'things', they are a function of our recognition of particulars and further ability to abstract from observation, extrapolate, and project beyond an immediate particular.

So as far as I am concerned, logic doesn't enter into it at a necessary level given the massive (and false imho) assumption in their idea of the nature of thoughts.

They fail because, fundamentally, they have misidentified an objective fact about reality.

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“2. For everything that exists, it is either a physical thing or a thought. (premise)”

So heaven is either physical or a thought? Moreover, either God's mind is synonymous with Their thoughts, or God is more than the conjunction of Their thoughts. If the latter, then the premise is unsound. If the former, then it is inexplicable why thoughts exist at all since nothing is thinking the thoughts, nor ever thought them, since thoughts can't think themselves into existence or sustain their existence.

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April 8, 2019 at 5:08 pm

<https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/bitstream/handle/1969.1/157717/NAVARRO-THESIS-2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> Hello prof. malpass a reformulation of weltys and andersons arguments were made recently here ,do you think this is exposed to the problems you presented here as well?

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apmalpass 👤

April 8, 2019 at 5:33 pm

Interesting. I will have a look

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lukekrell

December 2, 2019 at 8:18 pm

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The laws of logic aren't things, but rather are the recognition of truth.

Existence exists.

Existence is not nonexistence.

Nonexistence is not existence.

These aren't three different ontological beings, but rather tautologies which all express the single act or recognizing existence.

Now we could formulate an argument this way.

1. Existence Exists
2. God is Existence
3. Therefore, God Exists

But this argument seems quite trivial.

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