

# SOME PROBLEMS IN ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENTATION

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There are several cosmological arguments for the existence of God, most notably the five famous proofs of St. Thomas Aquinas. A cosmological proof takes some aspect of the physical world in which we live, and attempts to show that we are rationally compelled to posit the existence of a god, or First Cause, in order to explain the existence of that natural state of affairs with which we started. Anselm, unlike Aquinas two centuries later, approached the question of God's existence from quite another direction. Instead of claiming that selected empirical facts require a Cause to explain them, ontological argumentation maintains that our rational concept of a highest being entails the reality or existence of that being. Of all the arguments for the existence of God, the Ontological Argument enjoys the status of being the only proof which locates the referents of its premises exclusively within the human reason. Defenders of The Proof maintain that Anselm's genius lay precisely in his discovery that the unaided human reason without appeal to the empirical order, is sufficient to demonstrate the inconceivability of God's non-existence. I shall concede that The Argument is indeed a logically valid proof, which demonstrates that once we have formed a rational concept of "that than which a greater cannot be conceived to exist," we involve ourselves in a logical contradiction if we then deny the necessary reality of the Divine. Of course, if Anselm's claim is sound then no rational man can opt for atheism. But the question to which we now must turn is whether The Argument does or does not prove anything. I have said that The Proof or at least that version of it which occurs in *Proslogium* III, is logically valid. However, if we assert that the greatest conceivable being has real existence, in reality no less than in thought, we must make an extra-logical assumption, namely that the laws of logical thought are the laws of things as well. In short we must subscribe to *essentialism*, i.e., the Aristotelian dogma that logical validity entails ontological commitment.

We will do well to take note of the ontological commitment which an Aristotelian logic requires us to make. Aristotle argued that logic, which for him consisted of syllogistic thought alone, proceeded from axioms. These axioms are not confined exclusively to logic alone, however, but are postulates of ontology as well. That is to say, the

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axioms of logic are immanent within the structure or nature of reality itself. Therefore any valid deductions which are derived from these axioms will have ontological counterparts outside the boundaries of logic. Hence a validly deduced syllogistic truth, which leads to a conclusion not previously known, points to a corresponding truth in reality. For Aristotle, and for those who share his view of the role logic plays in human cognition, logical truth cannot be divorced from ontological commitment. In *Metaphysics* IV, Aristotle clearly indicates that the axioms of logic are also laws of being qua being. There is one "science," as he calls it, for each specific kind of inquiry; thus biology is the science of living things, medicine is the science of the medical art, and so on. There is, however, one discipline—philosophy—which is the science of the whole of being (i.e., being qua being, which is generally one and not relative merely to a particular part or aspect of being, such as biology or medicine). The philosopher's research carries him to the study of axioms:

We must state whether it belongs to one or to different sciences to inquire into the truths which are in mathematics called axioms, and into substance. Evidently, the inquiry into these also belongs to one science, and that the science of the philosopher; for these truths hold good for everything that is, and not for some special genus apart from others. And all men use them, because they are true of being *qua* being and each genus has being . . . And the attempts of some of those who discuss the terms on which truth should be accepted, are due to a want of training in logic . . .

Evidently then it belongs to the philosopher, i.e. to him who is studying the nature of all substance, to inquire also into the principles of the syllogism.<sup>1</sup>

It is apparent that the Stagirite is here making the claim that the laws of logic are laws of being qua being as well. Hence, if a conclusion is derivable by a syllogistic line of reasoning, a corresponding ontological reality is entailed.

The view I am here describing, concerning the relation between logic and ontology, is often referred to as essentialism. And it was an essentialist presupposition of this kind that Anselm entertained. This is not to say that Anselm was dependent upon Aristotle himself; after all, he was writing a full century and a half before the Aristotelian corpus was reintroduced to the West and translated into Latin. Nonetheless, I think it can scarcely be denied that Anselm was operating within an essentialist view of the role which logic plays in rational argumentation. He saw no limits to which the human reason could not

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<sup>1</sup>Aristotle, "Metaphysics," *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, Inc., 1941), pp. 735-736.

aspire. His logic, to be sure, was not a well developed calculus by modern, or even by Aristotelian, standards; but (a) a modest calculus was implicit, (b) the concept of contradiction was clearly entertained, and (c) an essentialist view of logic was presupposed. Anselm believed that our concept of the greatest conceivable being could be articulated in logically exacting form, and that from this concept alone we may infer the necessary existence of an ontological reality corresponding to our concept. And in this Anselm is correct: given an essentialist logic, we are driven to the conclusion that *that*, than which a greater cannot be conceived to exist, *must*, if to exist in reality is greater than to exist in the human understanding alone, *exist* in reality no less than in the human understanding.

But need we be given an essentialist logic? Most modern logicians would reply, and I am inclined to agree, that Aristotle (and Anselm too, though not because of Aristotle) failed to distinguish between (a) a logic which deals with formal relations among propositions, and (b) an essentialism which entails the ontological existence of entities which seem to be logically required. The scope of logical inquiry today is concerned almost exclusively with formal relations among propositions in an uninterpreted system; that is, the values for which the variables stand are of secondary concern to the logicians. It does not matter what the variables symbolize; the logical form remains the same.

Now the distinction between an essentialist logic, as opposed to a calculus which concerns itself with logical form alone, is of critical importance to the Ontological Argument. For if we reject essentialism, then even if the Ontological Argument is articulated in acceptable logical form, its validity will in no way entail the necessary existence of that than which a greater cannot be conceived to exist. A logic pre-occupied with form alone will in no respect require a corresponding ontological commitment to any entities, including God.

It is a well documented fact that most contemporary philosophers are not persuaded by Anselm's proof. One author of no mean reputation, J. N. Findlay, has gone so far as to say that Anselm's argument can be turned back upon itself, and that the Saint has unintentionally proved, at most, that the notion of God's necessary existence is inconceivable. In a widely read article in *Mind*,<sup>2</sup> Findlay offers the following disproof of the necessary existence of God, which I have paraphrased below:

Premise: If the concept of "that than which a greater cannot be conceived to exist" is logically possible, then at least one entity must exist non-contingently, i.e., necessarily.

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<sup>2</sup>J. N. Findlay, "Can God's Existence Be Disproved?" *Mind*, LVII (April, 1948), 176-183.

Premise: Yet it is axiomatic that entities cannot be defined into existence, just because our concepts may require such entities.

Premise: There cannot be at least one entity which necessarily exists.

Conclusion: The concept of "that than which a greater cannot be conceived to exist" is logically impossible, and we cannot intelligibly entertain that concept within the human understanding.

Findlay's disproof is intriguing; he insists on a disjunction—*either* God is a necessarily existent being, *or* He is utterly inconceivable—and then concludes that, since God cannot without contradiction be a necessary being, we cannot even form a concept of Him. It is Findlay's claim that "necessity" is a term which can in no meaningful sense be coupled with "existence." He states his position well:

'Necessity' in propositions merely reflects our use of words, the arbitrary conventions of our language. On such a view the Divine Existence could only be a necessary matter if we had made up our minds to speak theistically *whatever the empirical circumstances might turn out to be*.<sup>3</sup>

Findlay's line of thought is especially interesting since the implication clearly is that ontological argumentation must inescapably lead not to theism but to atheism. Anselm, it is charged, has unwittingly given us an argument that can be used against him to disprove the logical possibility of God's necessary existence.<sup>4</sup>

Now Professor Findlay's ontological disproof can hardly be ignored. He has proposed, against Anselm, a case which is both intelligibly articulated and logically sound. The conclusion he reaches is valid if we accept the premises from which that conclusion is derived. But there are some reservations to which we are entitled.

Our first objection is this: in premise 2 of the disproof, as I have paraphrased it, Findlay implicitly assumes a non-essentialist view of logic. Now he is perfectly justified in making that assumption, but it is hardly fair to conclude that it is *Anselm* who has been disproven. Anselm's adherents can simply reply that Findlay is not even talking about

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>In a later rejoinder to some criticisms of his position, Findlay somewhat modified his views and conceded that he may have overstated his case in the original article which appeared in *Mind*. [See J. N. Findlay, "Can God's Existence be Disproved?" *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. Anthony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), pp. 71-75.]

the Ontological Argument at all. What Findlay has constructed is an ingenious ontological disproof of God's necessary existence, but he has in no way spoken to The Proof which Anselm conceived, let alone refuted it. Anselm wanted to assume an essentialist view of logic and Findlay has not begun to show that that assumption is groundless. Hence he has not, as he claims to have done, fought Anselm's own ground. Therefore the validity of The Proof itself remains undefiled.

A second complaint we can make against Findlay comes as a direct outgrowth of our first reservation above. Our author wants to assume a non-essentialist posture toward logic but then proceeds to a conclusion which entails the *non-existence* of God. Yet it is through the strength of *logic* that Findlay attains this result. Now it would seem that an essentialist logic is just as much required to reach a conclusion about the non-existence of God as is needed to reach a conclusion about the existence of God. Findlay has made no less an ontological commitment than Anselm. Anselm used logic to deduce the necessary existence of a reality than which a greater could not be conceived to exist; Findlay uses logic to deduce that such a reality could not conceivably exist. Who has sinned the least? Anselm for openly espousing essentialism, or Findlay for covertly smuggling in essentialism while openly disavowing it? Of the two, Anselm seems to have had the clearer notion of what he was doing. He at least intended to make an ontological commitment, and was consciously aware of it, while Findlay did not want to make an ontological commitment, but unconsciously did so. It seems to me that once we have divorced ourselves from the essentialists' presupposition, and have denied that existential claims may be deduced from logical validity alone, then we are no more entitled to deduce the non-existence of God than to deduce the existence of God. We must retain a cautious agnosticism, and not commit ourselves to any existential conclusion which our logic seems to demand.

There is yet a third transgression which Findlay has committed. He has asserted that a theist can maintain his conviction that God necessarily exists only by ignoring "empirical circumstances." In other words, the theist can only maintain his position by fiat; he must legislate in advance against the possibility that new evidence will controvert his belief. And what, according to Findlay, counts as "evidence"? Obviously, he will only admit empirical data, which can be confirmed within sense experience.

Professor Findlay will pull some academic wool over our eyes, if we are not careful. There are two excellent reasons why he should not

be allowed to establish empirical experience as the sole criterion for what counts as evidence for or against Anselm's Argument.

In the first place, it is no discredit to Anselm, as a theist, if we banish sense experience. Ontological argumentation is to reason from concept to necessary being, *not* from concept to (contingent) empirical fact, *nor* again from empirical fact to concept, *nor* again from empirical fact to necessary being. In *Proslogium* I the Saint stands in awe before the magnitude of his task. He clearly recognizes that the necessary being, whose existence he must prove, lies *outside* the empirical domain:

Lord, if thou are not here, where shall I seek thee, being absent? But if thou art everywhere, why do I not see thee present? Truly thou dwellest in unapproachable light. But where is unapproachable light, or how shall I come to it?<sup>5</sup>

Passages such as this—and many similar lines throughout his works, written in the same prayerful style—demonstrate Anselm's conviction that God's existence cannot be established by sense experience. The "Unapproachable Light" subsists *beyond* the world of space, time, and matter; and the Saint at no point pretends otherwise. Neither Findlay, nor any one else who has read the *Proslogium* closely, is entitled to the claim that Anselm did not know what he was doing. It is clear to the Saint that God's existence transcends the finite world and the limited senses with which we perceive that world; God must *reveal* Himself, for He will never be grasped by our poor tools of perceptual awareness. Hence, if Findlay believes that Anselm's credentials as a *theist* are compromised, it is not because Findlay has shown that a transcendent God cannot subsist outside the finite order, but because he has failed to understand the theist's position. It is not clear to Findlay that there might be other criteria of evidence than empirical experience; but it is clear to Anselm that sense experience cannot partake of the "Unapproachable Light." What Findlay must show, if his case against theism is to succeed, is that empirical data *alone* can count as evidence for or against the existence of God. But this is precisely what he has failed to establish.

In the second place, Findlay is not justified in concluding that, since God is not perceivable by the senses, He therefore cannot exist. What is required of the empiricist is that he exhibit empirical evidence for the non-existence of God. If he cannot show this, then he can never be a respectable atheist; he will always lack, for his own convictions, the same kind of evidence he requires others to have for their convic-

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<sup>5</sup>Saint Anselm, *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1962), pp. 3-4.

tions. But Findlay believes, incredibly, that he has disproved the possibility of a being which necessarily exists. All he has shown, in fact, is that from his empirically oriented premises we can never reach the conclusion Anselm reached. But even Anselm conceded this. Empiricism leads only to agnosticism, never to atheism. From within the empiricist's framework it takes faith to be a theist, and, I charge, faith in equal measure to be an atheist. We can never conclude, from the lack of empirical evidence for God, that God *therefore* does *not* exist.

The conclusions to which I am drawn in this brief essay are modest. For one thing, I believe the essentialist presupposition to be specious; there are no good reasons for believing that logical validity entails ontological commitment. Second, empirical evidence does not suffice to establish either the existence or the non-existence of the Divine. Theism and atheism alike rest at last on faith grounds; and if this is the case we stand on the threshold of yet another problem, namely that there may well be no ontological *argument* at all, in any rational or discursive sense of the term "argument," since the person who finds The Proof convincing, from a rational point of view, must already at the faith level have conceded the reality of God. So it would perhaps be better to modify my original claim and to say only that *if* The Proof is genuinely an argument, then it is valid, remembering that validity alone is not enough; of course, if it is not an argument, but rather a confession of faith, then Anselm has not really established anything new which was not already evident to the eye of faith; and this perhaps is the intuitive content of Anselm's dictum:

For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe,—that unless I believed, I should not understand.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Saint Anselm, *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1962), p. 7.

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