

Cambridge University Press

0521863694 - Rethinking the Ontological Argument: A Neoclassical Theistic Response

Daniel A. Dombrowski

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Three key moments in the history of the ontological argument can be identified. First, in the eleventh century St. Anselm stated the argument in an explicit way for the first time, or at least one could argue that this is the case. Second, in the eighteenth century the criticisms of the ontological argument by Hume and Kant struck what seemed to be the death knell of the argument. And third, in the middle decades of the twentieth century several thinkers – most notably Charles Hartshorne, Norman Malcolm, and John Findlay – breathed new life into the argument by claiming that Hume and Kant criticized only the weaker version of the ontological argument, found in Ch. 2 of Anselm's *Proslogion*, not the stronger modal version, found in Ch. 3. To be precise, Hartshorne is the one who discovered two versions of the argument in Anselm's *Proslogion* in 1953 (see Hartshorne 2000, 96–97). Seven years later Malcolm wrote his justly famous article (Malcolm 1960). Further, Hartshorne was the first to give a formalized version of the argument using the calculus of modal logic (Hartshorne 1961b; 1962, 50–51).

The present book is an attempt to assess the impact of this third key moment in the history of the ontological argument on contemporary philosophy. I should be clear at the outset that I think there are several versions of the ontological argument – both in ordinary language and formal versions – that are not only valid but sound. Further, I think that Hartshorne's version of the ontological argument (rather than, say, Malcolm's) is especially worthy of defense. But I will not be examining in detail the debates among Hartshorne, Malcolm, and Findlay themselves, nor between these thinkers taken as a group and their various critics in the mid- and late-twentieth century. Rather, I will be putting

Cambridge University Press

0521863694 - Rethinking the Ontological Argument: A Neoclassical Theistic Response

Daniel A. Dombrowski

Excerpt

[More information](#)

a Hartshornian defense of the ontological argument in dialectical tension with six different scholars who have more recently written on the argument.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with English-language thinkers who are skeptical of the ontological argument, in particular, and of metaphysical arguments, in general, from what can be designated as a “continental” point of view (mixed with a neopragmatist point of view, in one case). Chapter 2 deals with a lifelong debate between Hartshorne and one of his most illustrious pupils: Richard Rorty. I will contrast Hartshorne’s defense of metaphysics and of the ontological argument with Rorty’s preference for “poetry,” as he uses the term. Indeed, Rorty thinks that poets should replace both metaphysicians and scientists as the leaders of culture.

Chapter 3 deals with Mark Taylor, a very influential deconstructionist thinker who has both examined in detail and taken swipes at the ontological argument. A critical engagement with Taylor’s thought will bring to the surface the rather expansive use of apophatic discourse that is characteristic of many contemporary philosophers of religion influenced by continental thought, especially by Jacques Derrida. I will argue that an overuse of negative theology is not as humble as it first appears, but rather constitutes an overly muscular use of a certain positive (and, I allege, mistaken) view of God that is monopolar.

The fourth and fifth chapters of the book deal with an analytic philosopher who has written the most careful, detailed (indeed, encyclopedic!) criticism of the ontological argument: Graham Oppy. As with Rorty and Taylor, Oppy develops certain criticisms of the ontological argument, in general, and of Hartshorne’s version of it, in particular, that are telling. Nonetheless, his nuanced “general objection” to the ontological argument is, I argue, defective precisely because it ignores a key distinction in Hartshorne between existence and actuality. I will show that by assuming the simple dichotomy between essence and existence, it is too easy for Oppy to push through his criticisms of the ontological argument. The more complex trichotomy of essence-existence-actuality, however, enables a defender of the ontological argument to escape Oppy’s general objection.

Despite Oppy’s facility with modal logic, he does not deal primarily with formal versions of the ontological argument, but rather with ordinary language versions (Oppy 1995, 3). I will follow him in this regard. Obviously I do not want to be interpreted as being content with unnecessary vagueness or ambiguity (nor does Oppy). Rather, along with Edgar Towne, I wish to claim that in the formulation of a defensible version of

Cambridge University Press

0521863694 - Rethinking the Ontological Argument: A Neoclassical Theistic Response

Daniel A. Dombrowski

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

the ontological argument there is still a great need for informal clarification of concepts and discovery. The clarification and discovery that will become evident in the present book could no doubt be “translated” into (or better, be “mapped” onto) a formal language; in fact, Hartshorne himself offers a formal version of his argument. I am assuming here that a formal version of the ontological argument is at least compatible with the flux of events and concepts that are involved in the hard work of constructing an ordinary language version of the argument.

Further, I hope to show that a defense of the ontological argument does not make the case for the necessary existence of God an exception to logical principles. When I claim at different points in the book that God is exceptional, this exceptional status will be the conclusion of an effort at rational argumentation, not an evasion of such (Towne, 1999, 241–243; Hartshorne 1941, 301). As Hartshorne puts the point: “Anselm’s Principle seems to be vindicated. Greatness is conceivable only as existent, by the very criteria which allow us to conceive either the existence or the nonexistence of any island, dollar, devil, you please” (Hartshorne 1965, xiii, 65, 71).

My treatment of Oppy’s views will lay bare what I take to be a significant contribution made by Hartshorne to the rationality of religious belief. At the one extreme are those who strip theistic belief of intellectual content. This extreme includes both unbelievers, who are convinced that theistic belief is epistemologically impoverished, as well as fideists, who are content with a faith that either transcends reason altogether or is meant to replace it. Among these fideists are those who deemphasize Anselm’s ontological argument or who deny its existence by claiming that Anselm’s *Proslogion* is an extended *prayer* rather than an intellectual attempt to argue for something. On this view the ontological “argument” is only a memorable part of that prayer (e.g., Moore 2003, 32).

At the other extreme are those who see the ontological argument as just one more deductive argument on a par with all others such that the chain of argumentation in it is only as strong as its weakest link. Many of the formal versions of the ontological argument that were presented in the wake of the Hartshorne, Malcolm, Findlay renaissance of the argument exhibit this tendency (e.g., Nasser and Brown 1969). The problem with this extreme view is not so much that the ontological argument is over-intellectualized as that the type of rationality used seems too restrictive, given the intellectual task. It seems that very few people can be persuaded or coerced into believing in the existence of God by deductive argument alone, with its “take it or leave it” character.

Cambridge University Press

0521863694 - Rethinking the Ontological Argument: A Neoclassical Theistic Response

Daniel A. Dombrowski

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Hartshorne's contribution lies somewhere between these extremes, and this is so for two reasons. First, although he is firmly committed to the task of rationally justifying belief in God, he does not think that any one argument, not even the ontological one, is sufficient. That is, he rejects the (Kantian) metaphor of an argument only being as strong as its weakest link and prefers instead the (Peircian) one to the effect that when several arguments mutually reinforce each other the common conclusion of these arguments is made stronger, as in the mutually reinforcing strands that make up a cable. Recent critics of the ontological argument have largely ignored the context of the ontological argument in a larger, cumulative, global argument where the weaknesses of any one argument are compensated by the strengths in other arguments, the testimony of religious experience, and so on, as was also the case in Duns Scotus (see Viney 1985, 10–11). Of course each of the argument strands in the cable must be valid: six invalid arguments do not mutually reinforce any conclusion worth believing.

As Donald Viney has aptly put the point, Hartshorne has rightly abandoned the notion that there could be a *demonstration* of God's existence if this means that there could be a deductively sound argument that every rational agent would accept. The use of position matrices enables one to steer a moderate course between a purely logical or deductive approach in relation to the question of God's existence, on the one hand, and a purely subjective or fideistic approach based solely on preference or faith, on the other.

Second, although Hartshorne himself offered a formal, deductive version of the ontological argument (Hartshorne 1962, 49–57), his more usual procedure is to work from position matrices so as to lay out the logically possible options to a particular problem, which in this case deals with the relationships among necessity-contingency and God's existence-nonexistence. Each option is carefully examined to determine its strengths and weaknesses. In effect, a defender of the Hartshornian version of the ontological argument forces one to be explicit regarding the price one is willing to pay in such a defense in that one has to confront the atheistic, agnostic, or positivist options. Likewise, the point to this type of defense of the ontological argument is to require the unbeliever to do the same regarding the plausibility of the theist's case, contra the all-or-nothing character of simple deduction. Deduction is part of a larger dialectical whole, on the Hartshornian view, a fact that is very much relevant when responding to Oppy's charge that the ontological argument is not dialectically effective.

Cambridge University Press

0521863694 - Rethinking the Ontological Argument: A Neoclassical Theistic Response

Daniel A. Dombrowski

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

Whereas Chapters 2 through 5 deal with three thinkers who ultimately reject the ontological argument, Chapter 6 deals with three defenders of the ontological argument: Thomas Morris, Katherin Rogers, and Alvin Plantinga. But these three thinkers defend not only Anselm's argument for the existence of God, but also Anselm's *concept* of God. I will argue that classical theism, even an Anselmian version of classical theism, is problematic for several reasons and therefore that the traditional (and unsolvable) problems found in classical theism have led many thinkers to prematurely reject the ontological argument itself. That is, I will argue that Hartshorne's neoclassical concept of God is more likely than is a classical theistic concept to sustain Anselm's best insights regarding the necessity of God's existence.

Much of the book deals with Oppy's criticisms of the ontological argument. He states: "I conclude that ontological arguments are completely worthless. While the history and analysis of ontological arguments makes for interesting reading, the critical verdict of that reading is entirely negative" (Oppy 1995, 199). There is a clear need for a book that responds in detail to Oppy's influential assessment.

I hope to show that the ontological argument is worth a great deal. First, it provides an effective strategy in the effort to demonstrate the rationality of theism when the theist is in dialectical exchange with unbelievers (e.g., Rorty, Oppy, and in a different way Taylor). Second, it is crucial for theists themselves in their effort to rationally understand what the necessary existence and contingent actuality of God entail. Third, it is an exercise in logic that can be used when confronted by the challenge posed by misologists (e.g., Rorty and Taylor). Fourth, it can be used in such a way as to help clarify the concept of God – the logic of perfection – when dealing with classical theists (e.g., Morris, Rogers, and Plantinga) as opposed to neoclassical theists. And fifth, it is a helpful argument for those who are interested in bridging the rather wide gap in contemporary philosophy of religion that divides continental thinkers (e.g., Taylor and to a lesser extent Rorty) and analytic philosophers (e.g., Oppy, Morris, Rogers, and Plantinga).

Regarding this last point, we should take seriously the comment of Billy Joe Lucas that "as we now carve up our discipline into its many sub-disciplines, any attempt to assess ontological arguments at this stage of our history is now beyond the range of competence of the practitioners of any such subfield" (Lucas 1997, 183). I am not quite as pessimistic as Lucas, although I am not quite ready to say that he is wrong, either. In any event, the present book is an effort to see how much *intradisciplinary*

Cambridge University Press

0521863694 - Rethinking the Ontological Argument: A Neoclassical Theistic Response

Daniel A. Dombrowski

Excerpt

[More information](#)

dialogue can go on in philosophy concerning the ontological argument. In this regard I will try to introduce scholars outside of process philosophy to the work of several thinkers who have carefully analyzed the ontological argument in recent years, but whose work has not been rebutted (or perhaps even read) by either analytic or continental philosophers. I have in mind first-rate scholars such as George Goodwin, Billy Joe Lucas, George Shields, Edgar Towne, and Donald Viney.

Ironically the chapters are intended to be as self-contained as possible. That is, each chapter could be read independently by those who are interested in only one or a few of the six authors who are criticized. However, a reader of all of the chapters will have a reticulative grasp of how a neoclassical (or, more loosely, a process) theism based on a modal version of the ontological argument fares in relation to several different influential strands in contemporary philosophy of religion.

The ontological argument, as I see it, is *the* metaphysical question seen from a particular angle. Getting clear on whether there is a necessary (divine) existent helps us to understand the status of other existents. Thus, despite the enormous attention this argument has received in the past, it is certainly worth the effort to clarify its status in light of recent developments: Rorty's and Taylor's versions of postmodernism; Oppy's scholarly trashing of the argument with the aid of the razor-sharp skills of contemporary analytic philosophy; and Morris's, Rogers', and Plantinga's recent efforts to use the ontological argument or perfect being theology in the service of traditional theism. When facing ultimate concerns (death, God), human beings face the twin dangers of maniacal faith, on the one hand, and a despairing cynicism or nihilism, on the other. This book is an attempt to mediate between these extremes (Hartshorne 1965, xii, 24–25, 87).

Cambridge University Press

0521863694 - Rethinking the Ontological Argument: A Neoclassical Theistic Response

Daniel A. Dombrowski

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Historical Background

A Brief History up until Anselm

This part of the book will be devoted to putting some flesh on the bones of the three key moments in the history of the ontological argument. The purpose of this history is obviously not to do an exhaustive survey of the historical uses of the argument, nor even to do original historical research of some more attenuated sort. Rather, I would like to sketch a history of the ontological argument so as to set the stage for my treatment of the six contemporary authors who are focus of the present book. As with many other topics in philosophy, current thinking about the ontological argument involves historical thinking in that the various concepts employed in discourse about the argument (concepts such as that there is that than which no greater can be conceived, perfection, existence as a predicate, necessity v. contingency, etc.) carry with them rich historical resonances (or baggage).

I should begin, I suppose, with Anselm, but there is good reason to think that although he was the first to state the argument explicitly, it is implicit in several earlier thinkers: Plato (Johnson 1963; Dombrowski 2005, Ch. 5; Halfwassen 2002; Mesquita 1994; Ceniza 2003), Philo and the Neoplatonists (Beckaert 1967; Oppy 1995, 101–105, 274–275), Avicenna (Rescher 1960; Morewedge 1970), and others. Oppy does not find the claim that there are implicit versions of the ontological argument in these earlier thinkers very convincing (Oppy 1995, 4; Esser 1905; Barnes 1972), so perhaps a few words in defense of the claim are in order.

Cambridge University Press

0521863694 - Rethinking the Ontological Argument: A Neoclassical Theistic Response

Daniel A. Dombrowski

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Consider the famous divided line of Book Six of Plato's *Republic*. The divided line establishes an epistemological, metaphysical hierarchy "whose supreme rule is that verification is always from above, never from below" (Eslick 1982, 21). The opposite procedure (from below) is exemplified by early logical empiricists like Russell and Carnap, whose reductive analysis of compound sentences terminates in protocol sentences (denoting the sensory atoms of Hume) like "red here."

For example, the lowest level of the divided line is *eikasia*, which is usually translated as "imagination." The objects of such an operation clearly are images, but Plato indicates that these objects are not verified from below, in empiricist fashion, for if they were so verified universal skepticism would result, due to the fleeting character of images. The next highest level is *pistis* or "belief" (which, together with *eikasia*, exhausts the world of *doxa* or "mere opinion" concerning becoming). It is easy to misunderstand the character Socrates (Plato's presumed spokesperson) here. In fact, Plato's own language abets this possible misunderstanding. One gets the impression that the objects of *pistis* are sensible things, which might lead some to mistakenly assume a perceptual realism that is foreign to Plato. Beliefs at this level of the divided line are not so much about the data of the senses as they are about the causes of such effects. As Leonard Eslick insightfully puts the point:

The beliefs we form even about the physical world are trans-empirical. . . . Their truth or falsity must be determined on a higher level still. In any case the physical feelings ("events" would be more accurate, since for Plato, with his Heraclitean heritage from Cratylus, the physical world is in process) are themselves only images, moving images of eternal [or better, everlasting] spiritual realities. (Eslick 1982, 23)

In order to confirm or falsify beliefs, one needs to do so from above, on the evidence of the divided line passage of the *Republic*. That is, one needs to cross over from the world of becoming to the world of being, as known by way of *dianoia* or "hypothetical understanding." Thinking by way of hypotheses is primarily exemplified for Plato by the mathematical sciences. The necessities discussed and demonstrated in these sciences remain hypothetical, involving an if-then connection in which the "if" clause cannot be eliminated. Further, dianoetic scientific demonstration can be either synthetic (where one begins with the first principles of the sciences – definitions, common notions, postulates – then moves downward deductively to theorems) or analytic (where instead of moving from hypothetical cause to effect, one moves in the reverse direction from effects to hypothetical cause).

Cambridge University Press

0521863694 - Rethinking the Ontological Argument: A Neoclassical Theistic Response

Daniel A. Dombrowski

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Historical Background*

9

To use Eslick's language, the base metals of synthesis and analysis on the level of *dianoia* are transmuted into the gold of *noesis* by an intellectual intuition of the form of the good in Book 7 (Eslick 1982, 27). If one has had such an intuition, the hypotheses of the mathematical sciences are destroyed in the sense that they lose their hypothetical character and are seen as necessary consequences of the unhypothetical first principle.

An insightful article by J. Prescott Johnson is helpful at this point. Johnson understands the Platonic principle that verification comes from above, not from below, to amount to an ontological argument for the necessary existence of the form of the good. Although Johnson does not discuss the relationship between the form of the good and God, if there is legitimacy to the Neoplatonic and early Christian view that forms are items in God's mind, then an argument for the necessary existence of the form of the good would, in effect, be an argument for the necessary existence of God (Johnson 1963, 24–34).

On Johnson's interpretation, the supreme formal reality is not to be treated as a mere hypothesis because it is needed as a principle of order for all of the lesser forms. Knowledge of the form of the good requires no assumptions or hypotheses, nor does it rely on the use of images, as *dianoia* does. To use contemporary language, this knowledge is strictly a priori and necessary. No merely contingent existence could be thus known (Hartshorne 1965, 139–140, 149). *Dianoia* is incapable of yielding incorrigible knowledge both because it begins with an unsubstantiated hypothesis and because it relies on at least partially distorting images.

Noesis, however, is a mode of cognition that may *start* from provisional knowledge of the hypothesis, but it ends with: "... certain knowledge of the ultimate principle which exists with necessity. This principle, ultimate and unconditional, Plato calls the 'unhypothesized beginning' – *archen anhypotheton*" (Johnson 1963, 29). The anhypotheton is the form of the good or the sun in the famous similes of the cave and the sun. Unfortunately, no explicit description is given in the *Republic* concerning the process by which *noesis* moves from hypotheses to the anhypotheton, so any effort to understand this transition involves a certain amount of risky scholarly speculation. This is where Johnson is helpful. It is clear that the noetic move *is* a mode of cognition. In the following, Johnson makes it clear why it is appropriate to see the ontological argument implied in Plato:

The anhypotheton, or the unhypothesized, is the unconditioned. But if the anhypotheton is merely and only a conceptual object, an epistemological construct, it is dependent upon conditions.... Thus the anhypotheton is either nothing at all – not even thinkable – or it is ontologically real as independent of all

Cambridge University Press

0521863694 - Rethinking the Ontological Argument: A Neoclassical Theistic Response

Daniel A. Dombrowski

Excerpt

[More information](#)

extraneous conditions, including the conditions of thought. Since, however, the anhypotheton is thinkable . . . it is clear that the anhypotheton is the ontologically real being necessarily existing in its possession of extra-epistemological reality. (Johnson 1963, 31)

My aim here is merely to claim that the ontological argument is implied in Plato. (It is not to confuse, as perhaps Plato and Johnson do, epistemological necessity with ontological necessity. We will see in response to Rorty that if we are lucky enough to gain knowledge of a necessarily existent God, this occasion for knowledge itself is contingent.) It is thus not surprising that most philosophers in the history of the discipline who have been called Platonists have also been defenders of the ontological argument and of the principle that verification is from “above” rather than from “below,” as empiricists suggest, by way of contrast. The quotation from Johnson makes it clear that, on a Platonic basis, to claim that the anhypotheton is contingent is a contradiction in terms: to say that the anhypotheton depends for its existence on certain limiting conditions or hypotheses is to contradict oneself.

As Hartshorne repeatedly emphasized throughout his career, on the basis of the ontological argument we can conclude that God’s existence (including God’s understanding of the form of the good) is either impossible or necessary, as the only remaining alternative in modal logic (i.e., the contingent existence of God) is contradictory regarding the argument that no greater being is conceivable. Hence the argument is best seen as suggesting that *if* God’s existence is possible, then it is necessary. Johnson, as can be seen in the passage just quoted, is confident that we *can* have a concept of the form of the good (and, by implication, of God). Hence God is possible, despite the fact that there is evidence in the text (509B) of a certain apophatic tendency in Plato wherein the form of the good transcends essence in dignity and power.

In any event, the cosmological argument in the *Laws* and *Timaeus* can be used to supplement the implicit ontological argument in the *Republic* in the following way. The cosmological argument makes it clear that we *can* get a legitimate concept of God. This concept facilitates the following choice before us as a result of the ontological argument: either God’s existence is impossible or necessary; but it is not impossible (as in the cosmological argument); hence it is necessary. The two arguments are thus working in the fashion of the aforementioned mutually reinforcing strands in a (Peircian) cable that lead to an overall or global argument for the existence of God that is quite strong (Hartshorne 1970; Viney 1985; Peikoff 1984). This reading of Plato enables us to see how he might have