Introduction: Ontological Arguments in Focus

Graham Oppy

Ontological arguments are arguments for the existence of God. The label 'ontological argument' was introduced by Immanuel Kant, who identified three major proofs of the existence of God: 'the ontological argument', 'the cosmological argument' and 'the teleological argument'. While cosmological arguments and teleological arguments were developed in the earliest stages of the history of philosophy – for example, in the West, there are cosmological arguments in Plato's *Laws* and Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, and there are teleological arguments in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Phaedo* – ontological arguments did not appear on the scene until the eleventh century CE. Moreover, while there have been periods of widespread endorsement of cosmological arguments and teleological arguments, there has never been a time at which there has been widespread endorsement of ontological arguments. However, some of the greatest figures in Western philosophy – including Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Hegel and (for a brief period) Bertrand Russell – have been proponents of ontological arguments, and there has been significant support for ontological arguments in some quarters of the Western academy since the middle of the twentieth century CE.

Much about ontological arguments is highly controversial. In this Introduction, we begin with two relatively uncontroversial matters: the broad contours of the history of discussion of ontological arguments, and the major topics that require discussion in connection with ontological arguments. We then move on to consideration of the much more difficult task of the characterization of ontological arguments – i.e., the task of saying exactly what ontological arguments are and explaining how they differ from, say, cosmological, teleological and moral arguments for the existence of God – and then the equally contested question of the provision of general objections to ontological arguments, including, in particular, attempts to show that there could not possibly be a successful ontological argument. Finally, we consider some often-neglected questions about how to assess the merits of arguments, with a particular eye on the assessment of the merits of ontological arguments.

1 History

The pivotal text on ontological arguments, the work on which all subsequent literature depends, is Anselm's *Proslogion*. The text of *Proslogion II* – the centrepiece of the work, discussed in the present volume by Peter Millican – has puzzled and inspired generations of philosophers; its interpretation and assessment remains deeply controversial. The text of *Proslogion III* – while not, I think, intended as an argument for the existence of God – has also puzzled and inspired generations of philosophers, leading eventually, in the work of Charles Hartshorne and Alvin Plantinga, to the development of a new family of (modal) ontological arguments.

The argument of *Proslogion II* was met with immediate criticism. In 1079 – the year after the publication of the *Proslogion* – Gaunilo of Marmoutiers attempted to show that the argument of *Proslogion II* did not succeed in proving that God exists. While Gaunilo's critique, and Anselm's reply to that critique, seem not to be always on target, Gaunilo did establish one enduring kind of response to ontological arguments: many have since followed him in supposing that ontological arguments can be parodied in ways which conclusively show that there are not successful proofs of the existence of God. Famously, Gaunilo provided a parody of Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument which purported to establish the existence of the 'Lost Island': an island superior everywhere in abundance of riches to all those lands that actually exist.

Despite Gaunilo's immediate response, Anselm's argument passed into a lengthy period of obscurity, from which it emerged not long before Aquinas subjected it to criticism which is discussed in the present volume by Brian Leftow. *Proslogion II* and *Proslogion III* are both objects of Aquinas' attention, e.g., in his commentary on Lombard's *Sentences*, in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and in the *Summa Theologiae*. Roughly speaking, Aquinas thinks that, while there is a sense in which God's existence is self-evident, and while it is also true that God's existence can be demonstrated to us, Anselm's argument fails to be a demonstration of God's existence. Given only the considerations to which the *Proslogion II* argument appeals, there is no inconsistency in the Fool's claim that there is no being than which none greater can be conceived.

At least from the time of Aquinas' criticism, Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument was a staple of discussion for medieval philosophers. However, the next major event in the history of ontological arguments was Descartes's various attempts, discussed in the present volume by Lawrence Nolan, to argue that

the existence of God – a supremely perfect being – is given in intuition and so is ultimately self-evident. The various works in which Descartes broaches this topic – *The Discourse on Method* (1637), *The Meditations* (1641), The First, Second and Fifth *Replies* to the *Objections* in the *Meditations*, and *The Principles* (1644) – have puzzled and inspired philosophers in much the same way as Anselm's *Proslogion II*; the interpretation and assessment of these texts remains deeply controversial. The First Objector, Caterus, supposes that Descartes's argumentative moves can be parodied in ways that utterly discredit them. The Second Objector, Mersenne, raises legitimate concerns about whether we can have the kinds of intuitions that Descartes supposes make it evident to us that God exists. The Fifth Objector, Gassendi, provides criticisms that anticipate Kant's famous attempt to defeat what are now typically called 'Cartesian ontological arguments'.

Descartes's views on the demonstration of the existence of God were much discussed by his successors, including More, Malebranche, Cudworth, Spinoza and Clarke. However, the next major episode in the history of ontological arguments was Leibniz's attempt, discussed in the present volume by Maria Rosa Antognazza, to fill what Leibniz – following in the footsteps of Mersenne – took to be a hole in Cartesian ontological arguments. Given the way that Leibniz proposed to construct his ontological argument, he needed a proof that the perfections are possibly jointly instantiated. The line of inquiry that Leibniz pursued eventually paved the way to Gödel's development of his higher-order modal ontological argument.

Descartes's views on the demonstration of the existence of God continued to be discussed after Leibniz: Wolff and Baumgarten both defended 'Cartesian ontological arguments', and Crusius provided them with criticism, which, to some extent, anticipated the next major step in the history of ontological arguments, taken by Kant, and discussed in the present volume by Lawrence Pasternack. As part of his systematic attack on the arguments of natural theology, Kant eventually – in *The Critique of Pure Reason* – provided a multi-pronged attack on what he there was the first to call 'the ontological argument'. Kant's most famous objection – that 'existence is not a real predicate' – initially advanced in *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, immediately became *the* standard criticism of ontological arguments, or, at any rate, of ontological arguments that were known to Kant.

Hegel refused to accept Kant's criticism of 'the ontological argument'. Moreover, Hegel provided his own defence of 'the ontological argument', discussed in the present volume by Michael Inwood. Hegel's claim that there is a

successful ontological argument was accepted by many for at least one hundred years after his initial staking out of the claim. However, as has been widely recognized, Hegel has a rather idiosyncratic conception of proof, and, perhaps, an even more idiosyncratic conception of God. Nonetheless, Hegel's courses of lectures on 'the ontological argument' have provided a very rich resource for subsequent students of ontological arguments.

After Hegel, there was a long period in which there were few innovations in discussion of ontological arguments. That is not to say that the arguments were ignored: Bertrand Russell reported that, for a brief period, he was converted to theism by a Hegelian ontological argument; and, throughout the Idealist age, there were many affirmations of the value of ontological arguments. But the next significant episode in the history of ontological arguments, discussed in the present volume by Alexander Pruss, was Kurt Gödel's 'systematization' of the argument that was developed by Leibniz, which – eventually – launched investigation of a new family of (higher-order (modal)) ontological arguments. Gödel's work – which took advantage of developments in logic for which he was, himself, partly responsible – introduced a new level of sophistication to the formulation of ontological arguments.

Before Gödel's work became publicly available – i.e., while it was simply sitting in his notebooks – there were two other significant advances in understanding of ontological arguments. The first of these advances, discussed in the present volume by Michael Almeida, was made by David Lewis, as an application of his theory of metaphysical modality. Lewis considered the representation of Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument in a language in which there is direct quantification over possible worlds, and arrived at the interesting conclusion that the argument admits of two quite distinct readings, one of which is invalid, and the other of which contains a premise that is evidently question-begging. This idea proved very influential in the subsequent literature. (Interestingly, in his analysis of the *Proslogion II* argument in this volume, Peter Millican finds that there are three quite distinct readings of the argument: one that is invalid, one that is evidently question-begging, and one that fails to establish the existence of anything divine.)

The other advance in understanding of ontological arguments that occurred prior to the publication of Gödel's notebooks was the development, by Charles Hartshorne and Norman Malcolm, of (modal) ontological arguments that they 'found' in *Proslogion III*. The kind of argument that they developed found its most impressive presentation, discussed in the present volume by Josh Rasmussen, in the work of Alvin Plantinga, primarily in his

1974 book, *The Nature of Necessity*. Plantinga, while accepting that his modal ontological argument is not a proof of the existence of God, nonetheless maintains that it is a 'victorious' argument: it shows that it is rational to accept the claim that God exists.

The final chapter in our history of ontological arguments requires some further scene-setting. In the last part of the nineteenth century, in Austria, work began on what we might call 'theories of non-existent objects'. On its face, Anselm's *Proslogion II* requires a background theory of non-existent objects. Those – such as Alexius Meinong, John Findlay, Richard Sylvan (né Routley), Terence Parsons, Graham Priest and Ed Zalta – who have participated in the development of theories of non-existent objects have *all* argued that successful ontological arguments cannot be developed in the context of those theories. Pavel Tichý provided an interesting alternative to theories of non-existent objects – through a comprehensive metaphysics of *roles* or *offices* – laid out in the present volume by Graham Oddie. Unlike almost all other authors Tichý takes Anselm's argument in *Proslogion III* as the more promising starting-point, and argues that it is not vulnerable to the well-known objections levelled by Kant and Frege against Descartes's argument, or that can be laid against Anselm's argument in *Proslogion II*. Tichý argues that while Anselm's argument in *Proslogion III* is logically valid, a key axiological premise – that necessary existence is a good property – is deeply implausible. Oddie digs deeper into the assumptions that Anselm could appeal to, and concludes that there is no plausible way of repairing them to yield a logically and axiologically sound ontological argument.

2 Topics

One part of the perennial fascination of ontological arguments is that adequate discussion of ontological arguments requires taking up a number of intrinsically interesting philosophical topics. This volume is rounded out by discussion of three of these intrinsically interesting topics.

The first topic, discussed in the present volume by Joshua Spencer, and of particular interest both in the context of assessment of the claim that it is possible that God exists and in the context of the interpretation of Anselm's *Proslogion II*, concerns the connections between conceivability and possibility. Many philosophers have been tempted by some version of the thought that what they can conceive provides them with some evidence about what is possible. Given some version of that thought, we might then be tempted to suppose that conceiving of God's existence provides some evidence that it is

possible that God exists; and we might also be tempted to suppose that we can reinterpret Anselm's 'conceiving'-talk as 'possibility'-talk.

The second topic, discussed in the present volume by Peter van Inwagen, and raised in connection with every ontological argument, concerns the nature of the alleged fallacy of begging the question. It is very common to hear people say that a particular ontological argument begs the question; it is not so uncommon to hear people say that 'the ontological argument' begs the question. But what, exactly, is it for an argument to be question-begging? This is a surprisingly difficult, and, I think, not very well understood, question. It is not hard to see, for example, that an argument that has its conclusion as one of its premises is not a successful argument. However, no interesting ontological arguments suffer from that defect. It is also not hard to see, for example, that we should not want to say that every valid argument is circular. Yet is surprisingly tricky to find a criterion for argumentative question-begging that neither entails that all valid arguments beg the question nor entails that the only arguments that beg the question are those that are transparently and obviously deficient in the way of arguments that have their conclusion as one of their premises.

The third topic was introduced above, in the examination of the last chapter in the history of ontological arguments, and is discussed in the present volume by Graham Priest. The conclusion of ontological arguments is an existence claim: either it is the claim that God exists, or it is a conclusion that is taken to evidently and immediately entail that God exists. Moreover, it is very often the case that premises in ontological arguments are also 'existence' claims, i.e., claims in which the concept of existence – or a cognate concept of, say, being – is deployed. But the interpretation and analysis of the concept of existence – and cognate concepts such as being – is a fascinating and intimidating topic in its own right. Any theorizing about existence and non-existence takes us into very deep water in both philosophy of language and metaphysics.

Of course, there are other topics that are important for the examination of ontological arguments. In particular, given that ontological arguments are arguments, the full investigation of ontological arguments requires some theory of argumentation, and some account of what it is for an argument to be successful. It is important to see, for example, that we cannot just be interested in determining, to our own satisfaction, which arguments are sound. Consider, for example, the following pair of arguments:

1. Necessarily, if God exists, then, necessarily, God exists. (Premise)
2. Possibly God exists. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) God exists. (From 1 and 2, by S5.)

1. Necessarily, if God exists, then, necessarily, God exists. (Premise)
2. Possibly God does not exist. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) God does not exist. (From 1 and 2, by S5.)

One of these arguments is valid just in case the other is valid. (If, for example, we suppose that S5 is the modal logic in employment, then both are valid.) Moreover, these arguments share the same first premise. So, if we are to suppose that only one of them is sound, it will be because we accept the second premise in one, and deny the second premise in the other. So – holding fixed the various things that we've supposed to this point – we can see that theists will suppose that the first argument is sound, and atheists will suppose that the second argument is sound, and agnostics will be undecided about which of the two arguments is sound. Given that we already knew that theists, atheists and agnostics divide in their attitudes towards the proposition that God exists, these arguments have done nothing to advance the state of any-one's knowledge. Moreover, insofar as theists, atheists and agnostics are rational, these arguments can do nothing to advance the state of anyone's knowledge. That we have satisfied ourselves that an argument is sound is not enough to allow us to conclude that it is a successful argument.

Another topic that is important in the examination of ontological arguments is the significance of ontological parodies. We noted earlier that several critics of ontological arguments have attempted to discredit ontological arguments by parodying them to their discredit. To illustrate the issues, consider the following – toy – ontological argument.

1. God is, by definition, a supremely perfect being.
2. Existence is a perfection.
3. (Therefore) God exists.

A critic of this argument might think that the following argument presents a challenge to the proponent of that first argument:

1. Rod is, by definition, a supremely perfect Martian.
2. Existence is a perfection.
3. (Therefore) Rod exists.

Why might this parody be a challenge to the first argument? Well, the only difference between the arguments lies in the first premise. And the first premise is a definition. If the proponent of the first argument is free to define 'God' using the expression 'a supremely perfect being', then surely the critic is free to define 'Rod' using the expression 'a supremely perfect

Martian'. Given that there are no other differences between the arguments, the second argument goes through if the first argument goes through. But we all know that the second argument does not go through: there are no Martians, so, in particular, there is no Martian that is supremely perfect *qua* Martian. So there must be something wrong with *both* arguments. While the production of a successful parody does not identify the flaw in the argument that is parodied, it is clear that a successful parody can suffice to discredit an argument.

There are many hard questions that come up in connection with particular ontological arguments. For example, Gödel's ontological argument is formulated in a classical third-order quantified modal logic with lambda-abstraction. There have been vigorous philosophical debates about: (a) whether we should embrace classical logic; (b) whether we should embrace modal logic; (c) whether we should embrace quantified modal logic; (d) whether we should embrace higher-order logic; and (e) whether we should embrace lambda-abstraction. Moreover, if we do decide to embrace classical third-order quantified modal logic with lambda-abstraction, there remains the very thorny question of *which* classical third-order quantified modal logic with lambda-abstraction to embrace. (Perhaps you will be relieved to learn that, in this volume, Alex Pruss evades most of these issues by considering stripped-back versions of Gödel's argument that do not require all of the machinery that Gödel himself introduces.)

Consider Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument. That argument, as it is formulated by Anselm, takes for granted that some things exist only in the understanding, some things exist only in reality, and some things exist both in the understanding and in reality. But what is taken for granted here requires a great deal of explanation if it is also to be taken at face value. One option is to assess Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument against the background of the kinds of theories of non-existent objects developed by Meinong, Findlay, Sylvan, Parsons, Priest, Zalta et al. (Graham Priest gives this kind of assessment of Anselm's argument in the present volume.) Another option is to recast Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument in ways that replace reference to existence in the understanding with talk about concept possession (see Peter Millican's contribution to this volume) or with talk about offices (see Graham Oddie's contribution to this volume). Yet another option is to recast Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument by reinterpreting Anselm's talk about conceivability as talk about possibility, following the lead of David Lewis and Robert Adams (see Mike Almeida's contribution to this volume).

3 Taxonomy

It is not straightforward to provide an accurate characterization of ontological arguments. When Kant introduced the term 'ontological argument' he said that ontological arguments 'abstract from all experience and argue, completely *a priori*, from mere concepts'. But it is not clear that any of the well-known arguments 'proceed completely *a priori*, from mere concepts'. Here are formulations of four of the best-known ontological arguments (due ultimately, respectively, to Anselm, Descartes, Plantinga and Gödel):

1. Whatever is understood exists in the understanding. (Premise)
2. The words that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived are understood. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) That-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived exists in the understanding. (From 1 and 2.)
4. If that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived exists only in the understanding, then that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived-and-that-exists-in-reality is greater than that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived. (Premise)
5. It is impossible for anything to be greater than that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived. (Premise)
6. (Therefore) That-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived does not exist only in the understanding. (From 4 and 5.)
7. (Therefore) That-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived exists in reality. (From 3 and 6.)

1. The idea of a supremely perfect being includes the idea of existence. (Premise)
2. The idea of a supremely perfect being is the idea of a being with a true and immutable nature. (Premise)
3. Whatever belongs to the true and immutable nature of a being may be truly affirmed of it. (Premise)
4. (Therefore) A supremely perfect being exists. (From 1, 2 and 3.)

1. A being is maximally excellent iff it is omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect. (Definition)
2. A being is maximally great iff it is necessarily maximally excellent and necessarily existent. (Definition)
3. It is possible that there is a maximally great being. (Premise)
4. (Therefore) There is a maximally great being. (From 1, 2 and 3.)

1. A is an essence of x iff for every property B, x has B necessarily iff A entails B. (Definition)
2. x necessarily exists iff every essence of x is necessarily exemplified. (Definition)

3. x is God-like iff x has as essential properties those and only those properties that are positive. (Premise)
4. If a property is positive, then its negation is not positive. (Premise)
5. Any property entailed by a positive property is positive. (Premise)
6. The property of being God-like is positive. (Premise)
7. If a property is positive, then it is necessarily positive. (Premise)
8. Necessary existence is positive.
9. (Therefore) Necessarily, the property of being God-like is exemplified. From 1–8.)

I think that it is pretty clear that not all of the premises in any of these arguments can plausibly be claimed to be true in virtue of conceptual containment; that is, I think that it is pretty clear that not all of the premises in any of these arguments can plausibly be taken to be conceptual truths. Moreover – though this is not immediately relevant to Kant's taxonomy – it is pretty clear that not all of the premises in any of these arguments can plausibly be claimed to be analytic. Certainly, no *objectors* to these arguments are going to suppose any of these things.

Perhaps it might be said: what matters is whether those who constructed the arguments suppose that they are abstracting from all experience, and arguing completely *a priori* from mere concepts. But I think that it is no less clear that Anselm, Descartes, Plantinga and Gödel do not take themselves to be arguing completely *a priori* from mere concepts. Indeed, it is not at all clear that either Plantinga or Gödel really is mounting any kind of argument for the given conclusion. Gödel claims that his interest is just in showing that, using the materials that Leibniz took to be available to him, you can reach the conclusion that Leibniz wanted; and Plantinga claims that the argument actually establishes only the conclusion that it is rational to believe that there is a maximally great being.

Perhaps it might be said: what matters is whether those who endorse the arguments suppose that they are abstracting from all experience, and arguing completely *a priori* from mere concepts. But I think that it is pretty clear that many of those who now endorse these arguments do not suppose that they are abstracting from all experience and arguing completely *a priori* from mere concepts. In my experience, when people endorse the arguments, they simply rely upon all-things-considered judgments about the various premises; and those all-things-considered judgments are not themselves arrived at by abstracting from all experience and arguing completely *a priori* from mere concepts.

Suppose we abandon the Kantian characterization. What should we put in its place? Perhaps we might say that what is distinctive of ontological arguments is that they have no premises whose justification relies upon perceptual