

Introduction

THE following is a discussion of certain kinds of arguments for the existence of God. The distinctive feature of the arguments – at least according to the traditional Kantian method of classification – is that they proceed from premises which at least some defenders of the arguments allege can all be known *a priori*. Consequently, it would be most appropriate to call these arguments ‘*a priori* arguments for the existence of God’. However, following Kant, it has been established practice to call these kinds of arguments “ontological arguments,” and I see no urgent reason to depart from this tradition. Many things have well-established but inappropriate names – for example, the Holy Roman Empire, which, as Voltaire pointed out, was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire.¹

I shall divide the arguments that I consider into six classes, namely, (i) *definitional arguments*, whose premises invoke certain kinds of definitions; (ii) *conceptual arguments*, whose premises advert to the possession of certain kinds of concepts or ideas; (iii) *modal arguments*, whose premises advert to certain possibilities; (iv) *Meinongian arguments*, whose premises invoke a distinction between different categories of existence; (v) *experiential arguments*, whose premises include the assumption that the concept of God is only available to those who

1 In my view, a better characterization of ontological arguments than the traditional Kantian characterization given in the text is as follows: Ontological arguments are arguments that proceed from considerations that are entirely internal to the theistic worldview. Other theistic arguments proceed from facts, or putative facts that are at least *prima facie* independent of the theistic worldview – for example, the presence of nomic, causal, or spatiotemporal order in the universe; the presence and nature of complex living structures in the universe; the presence and nature of conscious and intelligent agents in the universe. But ontological arguments are concerned solely with a domain or theory that is *in dispute* between theists and their opponents.

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have had veridical experiences of God; and (vi) “Hegelian” arguments, which, at least in my view, bear some relation to the philosophy of Hegel. This division will not be mutually exclusive; that is, some arguments may belong to more than one category. Moreover, it may not be exhaustive. However, I do not know of any *a priori* arguments for the existence of God that do not belong to at least one of these categories.

For each of these categories of argument, I propose to do two things. First, I shall exhibit some arguments that belong to the category in question. And, second, I shall explain why none of the arguments that I exhibit provides me with a convincing reason to believe in God. The explanation of why I find the arguments unconvincing is different for each of the six categories of argument – and, indeed, this is the main rationale for the division that I make.²

There are various other tasks that will remain to be undertaken. The objections that I propose to give are mostly ones that I have been unable to find in the literature – though they usually bear some close relation to objections that have appeared there. In many cases, it will be useful to explain why the objections that have been formulated hitherto are not perfectly satisfactory. In particular, I shall consider the question of the relevance, and correctness, of the claim that existence is not a predicate, and I shall also evaluate the claim that it is possible to parody *a priori* arguments for the existence of God in ways that show that those arguments are unacceptable.

Throughout the first part of this work, I shall mostly be considering the arguments from the standpoint of an agnostic – that is, from the standpoint of someone who is committed neither to the existence, nor to the nonexistence, of the deities whose existence the arguments purport to establish. My interest is in whether the arguments provide such a person with good reasons to accept the conclusions of those

2 Peter van Inwagen (1977:375) discusses what I shall call ‘modal ontological arguments involving necessity’. He claims that “every well-known ‘version of the ontological argument’ is either (i) essentially the same as one of the arguments called ontological herein, or (ii) invalid or outrageously question-begging, or (iii) stated in language so confusing it is not possible to say with any confidence just what its premises are or what their conclusion is supposed to be.” My discussion shows that this is mistaken: Modal ontological arguments involving necessity are no clearer, and no better, than, e.g., conceptual ontological arguments, or Meinongian ontological arguments, or modal ontological arguments involving actuality – and yet these kinds of arguments are clearly distinct from modal ontological arguments involving necessity.

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arguments. In the last part of the work, I shall take up the question whether the arguments have some value for those who are antecedently convinced of the truth of their conclusions.

I have not bothered to give formalizations of the arguments that I discuss. This is not because I think that there is no value in the formalization of intuitive arguments; on the contrary, I think that there is much to be learned from the formalization of intuitive arguments. However, I do not think that anything would have been added to the discussion that I give by the formalization of the arguments.³

Also, I have not worried about niceties concerning quotation: corner quotes, use versus mention, and so on. Readers who care will be able to work out for themselves which uses of single quotes are really uses of corner quotes – for example, those in which schematic letters appear.

Finally, I occasionally refer to modal logics – K, T, B, S₄, S₅, and so on – by their standard (Hughes and Cresswell: 1968) names without giving any further information about them. Readers who want to know more about them should consult one of the standard texts on modal logics listed in the bibliography.

3 For those who are interested, for most of the arguments discussed, I have provided references to works in which they have been formalized.

Chapter 1

Some historical considerations

I BEGIN with a synoptic history of ontological arguments. In the remaining part of this chapter, I shall discuss the works of some of the more prominent historical figures – St. Anselm, Descartes, Leibniz, Hume, and Kant – in more detail. Then, in the following chapters, I shall provide analyses of different kinds of ontological arguments, and show how these analyses relate to the historically important arguments.

(1) HISTORICAL SYNOPSIS

Ontological arguments have been “found” in ancient Greek philosophy,¹ in St. Augustine² and other early Christians, and in the work of

1 Hartshorne (1965) attempts to locate an anticipation of St. Anselm’s ontological argument in the writings of Plato – and he also discerns related anticipations in Aristotle, Philo, and Ikhnaton. Similar attempts have been made by Ferguson (1953), Johnson (1963), and Paullin (1906). As Barnes (1972:18) notes, these attempts are mostly not very convincing. However, following Ferguson, Barnes suggests that there is an ontological argument in the writings of Zeno of Cition, as reported by Sextus Empiricus: “A man can properly honour the gods; a man cannot properly honour what does not exist; therefore the gods exist.” But, while this argument bears some relation to, e.g., the Cartesian ontological argument, it seems doubtful that this argument qualifies as an ontological argument. In particular, it is doubtful that it should be allowed that one could reasonably hold that the first premise is knowable *a priori*.

Slattery (1969) claims that ontological arguments were invented by Parmenides. However, while it is clear that there are affinities between Parmenides’ “way of truth” and Spinoza’s “ontological argument,” it seems to me that the title ‘ontological argument’ should be reserved for arguments that purport to demonstrate the existence of a *deity*. And, moreover – the views of Spinoza notwithstanding – it seems clear to me that it is a mistake to suppose that the universe, or the Universal Substance, is a deity. Those who see no difficulty in the view that the universe is God should take the present paragraph to record a terminological decision; for,

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Jewish and Islamic philosophers prior to the eleventh century.³ However, it can be reasonably contended that the first clear statement of an ontological argument is that of St. Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury, in the eleventh century. St. Anselm's argument was much discussed throughout the succeeding centuries. Many prominent medieval thinkers accepted St. Anselm's argument – or modified versions of it – including Duns Scotus and St. Bonaventure. However, other significant medieval thinkers, including St. Thomas Aquinas and William of Occam, rejected the argument. One of the most important objections to St. Anselm's argument was provided by one of his contemporaries, the monk Gaunilo.

Ontological arguments received a fresh defense in the work of Descartes. It is not clear how much of Descartes' arguments were original with him – in particular, the nature and extent of his acquaintance with the work of St. Anselm is controversial – though the use to which he put the arguments in his philosophical system was undeniably his own work. The replies to Descartes' *Meditations* – the work of some of his prominent contemporaries – collected together a number of valuable objections to his versions of the arguments. Many of these objections were unduly neglected during the succeeding centuries.

Leibniz defended Descartes' arguments. In particular, he attempted to defend one of the assumptions upon which the arguments seem to depend, namely, that the notion of an absolutely perfect being is coherent. Malebranche, Spinoza, Baumgarten, and Wolff also accepted ontological arguments, generally in their Cartesian form. On the other hand, Berkeley noted: "Absurd to Argue the Existence of God from his Idea. . . . we have no Idea of God. 'tis impossible!"⁴ And Locke,

despite my reservations, I do discuss Spinoza's argument – c.f. Section 4 in the literature notes.

- 2 For the claim that St. Anselm's argument is anticipated by St. Augustine, see Malcolm (1960:14) and Maloney (1980:1314). As Copleston (1950:70) notes, it is plausible to think that St. Anselm was influenced by the words of St. Augustine – e.g., by St. Augustine's claim that "all concur in believing God to be that which excels in dignity all other objects" (*De gratia et libero arbitrio ad valentinum*); however, this is hardly evidence that St. Augustine actually produced an ontological argument.
- 3 For the claim that St. Anselm's argument is anticipated by Islamic theologians, see Morewedge (1970), who claims that there is a modal ontological argument in ibn Sina.
- 4 *Philosophical Commentaries*, 782. Sillem (1957:44) claims that Berkeley "never discussed the ontological argument, nor even suggested that it might have any value or interest. He referred to it but once, and then only in a curt note [cited in the main text]." This isn't quite correct, since there are clear references to ontological argu-

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while refusing to take a stand on the question whether the Cartesian arguments constitute proofs, observed that “It is an ill way of establishing [God’s existence] and silencing atheists.”⁵

Hume provided what he took to be a simple and decisive refutation of all *a priori* arguments for the existence of God.⁶ This “simple and decisive refutation” was taken over by Kant, who provided it with various embellishments. It has been the opinion of many subsequent philosophers, including some current ones, that the Kantian form of the Humean objection is absolutely decisive.

Hegel held that “the ontological argument” provided the sole sound demonstration of the existence of God; this view was taken over by many subsequent Hegelians – for example, Collingwood.⁷ On the other hand, Schopenhauer held that ontological arguments involved a “charming joke.”⁸

As a young man, Bertrand Russell (1946b:10) came to believe in the existence of God as the result of some Hegelian ontological reasoning:

I remember the precise moment, one day in 1894, as I was walking along Trinity Lane, when I saw in a flash (or thought I saw) that the ontological argument is valid. I had gone out to buy a tin of tobacco; on my way back, I suddenly threw it up in the air, and exclaimed as I caught it: “Great Scott, the ontological argument is sound.”

Later, Russell (1946a:568) came to the view that “the argument does not, to a modern mind, seem very convincing, but it is easier to feel

ments in *Alciphron*. Nonetheless, speaking very roughly, we can say that it is characteristic of the British empiricist tradition to hold ontological arguments in low esteem – and that it is characteristic of the continental rationalist tradition to hold a much more respectful attitude toward them.

5 Locke (1964/1690:4, IX, 7).

6 Under this category, Hume included both ontological and cosmological arguments, even though the latter are not, strictly speaking, *a priori* arguments.

7 Ontological arguments were very important for both the British and U.S. idealists. On the British side, ontological arguments are defended by Stout, Bosanquet, the Cairds, and many others. And on the U.S. side, ontological arguments are defended by Royce, Hocking, Sheldon, and, ultimately, Hartshorne. Perhaps some of the arguments that these authors call ‘ontological’ are badly named. For example, the argument defended by Sheldon (1923) (1924) (1929) – from and for the extraordinary, but barely intelligible hypothesis that the basic principle that governs the world is that all possibilities are realized equally in the long run – is only dubiously *a priori*. For further references to the idealist literature, see Bandas (1930) and the works referred to therein.

8 Schopenhauer (1897), excerpted in Plantinga (1965:65–7). Subsequent citations of Schopenhauer are from this text.

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convinced that it must be fallacious than it is to find out precisely where the fallacy lies." In fact, Russell thought that his philosophy of language – in particular, his theories about quantification, definite descriptions and proper names – showed just where ontological arguments go wrong. This view was shared by many of Russell's contemporaries and successors – for example, Frege, Moore, and Ryle – during the heyday of linguistic analysis. Somewhat similar views were held by the logical positivists, who maintained that a proper theory of meaning revealed that all "religious" talk is meaningless.

From the late 1950s, the tide began to turn against the positivists and linguistic analysts, at least narrowly construed. Work in modal logic – especially that of Kripke – prompted a revival of metaphysics. One of the products of this revival was a renewed interest in ontological arguments. Hartshorne (1941) (1962) (1965) and Malcolm (1960) – and later, though in a quite different way, Plantinga (1974a) – defended modal ontological arguments. Moreover, Plantinga (1967) objected strenuously to the suggestion that Kant had provided a definitive refutation of nonmodal ontological arguments. Once the dam was breached, there was a steady stream of defenses of different ontological arguments. Of course, these articles generated a similar stream of responses and attempted refutations. One important aim of the present book is to describe and assess this recent work.

So much for the potted history. I turn now to a slightly more detailed account of some of the most important work referred to in this sketch.

(2) ST. ANSELM'S ARGUMENTS

St. Anselm (c. 1033–1109) produced two famous theological works in 1077 and 1078, during the time that he was prior of the Abbey of Bec in Normandy. The first of these, the *Monologion*, was a lengthy meditation on the Christian understanding of God. St. Anselm was dissatisfied with its complexity and entered into a search for a single premise that would serve as the foundation for a proof of the existence and nature of God. When he finally discovered what he took to be a suitable principle, he recorded his discovery in a work entitled *Proslogion*. This work consists of twenty-six chapters; most subsequent attention has focused on chapters 2–4.

There is little about the *Proslogion* that is completely uncontroversial. Some theologians have gone so far as to deny that in it St. Anselm intended to put forward any proofs of the existence of God. Moreover,

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among those who agree that St. Anselm did intend to prove the existence of God, there is considerable disagreement about its method. Some hold that chapter 2 contains the main argument, and that chapter 3 is supplementary to it. Others argue that the main argument is in chapter 3. I am not interested in pursuing these tiresome exegetical questions. Since St. Anselm's text can be read as an attempt to prove the existence of God, and since it has been interpreted by many readers in this way ever since it first appeared, I see no reason why I should not read the text in this way. Moreover, I shall pay serious attention to any *prima facie* plausible ontological argument that can be derived from it. In particular, I shall suppose that there are distinct arguments in chapters 2 and 3 and that these arguments deserve separate treatment.

The first difficulty that confronts a reader of the *Proslogion* is to find a clear and precise statement of its arguments. I shall begin with a consideration of the argument in chapter 2.

(a) *Chapter 2 of the Proslogion*

The crucial passage from *Proslogion 2* may be translated as follows:

Thus even the fool is convinced that something than which nothing greater can be conceived is in the understanding, since when he hears this, he understands it; and whatever is understood is in the understanding. And certainly that than which a greater cannot be conceived cannot be in the understanding alone. For if it is even in the understanding alone, it can be conceived to exist in reality also, which is greater. Thus if that than which a greater cannot be conceived is in the understanding alone, then that than which a greater cannot be conceived is itself that than which a greater can be conceived. But surely this cannot be. Thus without doubt something than which a greater cannot be conceived exists, both in the understanding and in reality.⁹

There are a number of ways in which this argument can be reconstructed, depending upon the interpretation that one is prepared to put upon the crucial expressions 'can be conceived' and 'exists in the understanding'. Some of these reconstructions do severe violence to the original argument – that is, they are best considered as arguments inspired by certain aspects of St. Anselm's writing; nonetheless, I shall give them consideration here.

9 Mann (1972:260–1). For alternative translations, see, among others, Barnes (1972), Campbell (1976), Charlesworth (1965), Deane (1962), Hopkins (1986), Hopkins and Richardson (1974), and Schufrieder (1978).

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As a first attempt at exhibiting the structure of the argument, I suggest the following:¹⁰

- 1a. When the fool hears the expression 'a being than which no greater can be conceived', the fool understands these words.
- 1b. If an expression 'X' is understood by a person Y, then X exists in the understanding of Y.
- 1c. (Hence) When the fool hears the expression 'a being than which no greater can be conceived', a being than which no greater can be conceived exists in the fool's understanding.
 1. A being than which no greater can be conceived exists in the understanding. (Premise, supported by 1a, 1b, 1c)
 2. A being than which no greater can be conceived does not exist in reality. (Assumption for *reductio*)
 3. If a being than which no greater can be conceived does exist in the understanding but does not exist in reality, then a being than which no greater can be conceived that exists both in the understanding and in reality is greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived. (Premise)
 4. A being than which no greater can be conceived that does exist both in the understanding and in reality is greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived. (From 1, 2, 3)
 5. No being is greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived. (Premise, supported by the meaning of the expression 'being than which no greater can be conceived')
 6. (Hence) A being than which no greater can be conceived does exist in reality. (From 2, 4, 5, by *reductio*)

One important feature of this presentation of the argument is 3. This premise just concerns a being than which no greater can be conceived – that is, it does not enunciate a general connection between greatness and existence in reality. There are a number of principles connecting greatness and existence in reality that have been attributed to St. Anselm and/or that have been discussed in connection with this argument. Among these principles are the following:

- 1a. Any being that exists in reality is greater than every being that exists only in the understanding.
- 1b. For some (specified) kind K, any being of kind K that exists

10 Most of the subsequent discussion will focus only on the second part of the argument – i.e., 1–6.

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in reality is greater than every being that exists only in the understanding.

- 1c. Any being that exists in reality is greater than every being of kind *K* that exists only in the understanding.
- 2a. For any kind *K*, any being of kind *K* that exists in reality is greater than every being of kind *K* that exists only in the understanding.
- 2b. For some (specified) kind *K*, any being of kind *K* that exists in reality is greater than every being of kind *K* that exists only in the understanding.
- 3a. For any being that exists only in the understanding, if there is a being that is just like it except that it also exists in reality, then that latter being is greater.
- 3b. For any kind *K*, for any being of kind *K* that exists only in the understanding, if there is a being of kind *K* that is just like it except that it also exists in reality, then that latter being is greater.
- 3c. For some (specified) kind *K*, for any being of kind *K* that exists only in the understanding, if there is a being of kind *K* that is just like it except that it also exists in reality, then that latter being is greater.
- 4a. For any being that exists only in the understanding, there is a greater being that is just like it, except that it also exists in reality.
- 4b. For any kind *K*, for any being of kind *K* that exists only in the understanding, there is a greater being of kind *K* that is just like it, except that it also exists in reality.
- 4c. For some (specified) kind *K*, for any being of kind *K* that exists only in the understanding, there is a greater being of kind *K* that is just like it, except that it also exists in reality.
- 5a. Some being that exists in reality is greater than every being that exists only in the understanding.
- 5b. For some (specified) kind *K*, some being of kind *K* that exists in reality is greater than every being that exists only in the understanding.
- 5c. Some being that exists in reality is greater than every being of kind *K* that exists only in the understanding.

It seems that some more general principle – perhaps to be chosen from the list that I have given – is required to support, or supplant, premise 3. After all, there seems to be no good reason to suppose that existence in reality is a great-making property solely in the case of a being than which no greater can be conceived. Consider, for instance, any being than which only a few greater can be conceived. Surely, if existence in