Ontological arguments and belief in God

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

*In memory of my mother
Jean Oppy*

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Preface

THIS book is part of a larger work, which seeks to expound and defend an agnostic stance on theistic matters. The larger work, most of which remains to be written, is intended to have four parts:

i.   an examination of conceptions of deities, including a discussion of the consistency and mutual compatibility of allegedly divine attributes, and an examination of the structure and function of religious vocabulary;
ii. an examination of traditional arguments for and against the existence of various deities, including: ontological arguments, cosmological arguments, teleological arguments, arguments from evil, moral arguments, arguments from revelation, arguments from authority, arguments from religious experience, and arguments from miracles;
iii. an examination of formulations of agnosticism, including a comparative evaluation of formulations of theism and atheism; and
iv. an investigation of the epistemological merits of agnosticism, including a somewhat qualified defense.

Obviously, the present work is one subpart of part (ii). Not surprisingly, the main thesis that is defended in it is that ontological arguments do not provide an agnostic with any good reason to change her view – that is, to give up her agnosticism. One of the projected themes of the larger work is that the most fruitful approach to arguments in philosophy of religion is to ask: Do these arguments embody reasons for agnostics – atheists, theists – to change their views? That is, do these arguments embody considerations that reasonable and reflective agnostics – atheists, theists – must recognize as providing motivating reasons for them to change their views? Or can there be reasonable

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and reflective agnostics – atheists, theists – who are quite reasonably unmoved by the considerations adduced in the arguments?[1]

The present work has four main components. First, there is a survey of the main events in the history of the discussion of ontological arguments. Second, there is an analysis of different kinds of ontological arguments, together with an application of that analysis to the major historical arguments. Third, there is an assessment of attempts to show that no ontological arguments can succeed, including (i) an examination of the question of whether existence is a predicate, and (ii) a look at the significance of various proposed parodies of ontological arguments. Finally, there is an examination of the uses that ontological arguments might be thought to have by theists and atheists, including a discussion of the idea that ontological arguments can be used to demonstrate the rationality of belief in the conclusions of those arguments.

There is a large appendix to the text, entitled "Literature Notes." It is primarily a survey of the vast recent literature on ontological arguments. Although decisions about where to locate material are to some extent arbitrary, I have tried to limit detailed examination of secondary sources to this appendix. Joint use of the index and the bibliography should facilitate the extraction of information from these pages.

Since judgments about what is reasonably believed play a large role in this work, a few remarks about this topic are in order.[2] I assume that there is a *procedural* or *dispositional* sense in which there can be reasonable theists, atheists, and agnostics: Such people are disposed to revise their beliefs when they are shown how their view can be improved – for example, simplified, unified, rendered more coherent, or rendered less inconsistent. Further, I assume that all parties interested in ontological arguments will concede this much; one could hardly suppose that one has an opponent with whom it is appropriate to *argue* unless one concedes that the person in question is dispositionally rational. Moreover, the main thesis for which I wish to argue is this: that ontological arguments do not give dispositionally reasonable agnostics – theists, atheists – a reason to change their views.

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1   See Oppy (1994) for a more detailed sketch of the general position that I endorse here.
2   These remarks were prompted by much appreciated comments from an anonymous reader at Cambridge University Press.

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More controversially, I also hold that ontological arguments should be located in a dialectical framework in which views are presumed innocent until convicted; in particular, I hold that there should be a *pro tem* presumption that there can be reasonable acceptance of theism – atheism, agnosticism – by sensitive, reflective, and informed persons. This *systematic* sense of reasonableness leaves room for the view that agnosticism – atheism, theism – is inconsistent, incoherent, intolerably convoluted, *ad hoc,* and so on, and so leaves room for the view that it could come to be the case that agnosticism – atheism, theism – cannot reasonably be believed by sensitive, reflective, and informed persons; and it also leaves room for the view that there can be reasonable acceptance of inconsistent – incoherent, intolerably complex, and *ad hoc* – views by subjects who are not suitably informed. Consider Russell and Whitehead's belief in the complete, recursive axiomatizability of arithmetic. At the time, their view was reflective and informed; but now one who held this view would not count as suitably informed, at least in those cases in which one is culpably ignorant of Godel's work. Clearly, more needs to be said about the notion of being "suitably informed" – and about the related notion of "epistemic responsibility" – but, as this is not a treatise on epistemology, I shall not attempt to do so here.

Of course, some people will simply disagree with my judgments about the systematic reasonableness of agnosticism – theism, atheism – because they disagree with my *pro tem* judgment that reflective and sensitive supporters of this doctrine can be suitably informed, that is, epistemically responsible. I do not suppose that such people are unreasonable, though I do find this stance unacceptable. I have friends who are theists, friends who are atheists, and friends who are agnostics; and I feel that it would be offensive and disloyal to some of them to hold that they are systematically irrational even though I know of no argument that on pain of conviction of procedural irrationality, should make them change their minds. However, for my purposes, nothing very important hangs on these questions about systematic rationality; none of the judgments in question affects the point that there is nothing in ontological arguments that should bring a procedurally reasonable agnostic – theist, atheist – to think that he has been systematically irrational.

Since many of the primary sources for the arguments that I discuss are historically significant philosophical and theological texts, some further remarks about my use of these texts may also be in order.[3]

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Throughout, my main interest is in the collection, classification, and analysis of arguments that sensitive, reflective, and informed persons do, or might, take to encode *a priori* reasons for the adoption of particular stances on questions about the existence of various deities. Consequently, my interest in historical texts is solely concerned with their use as sources of such arguments, or as sources of criticisms of such arguments, quite independent of the question whether the texts are *best* interpreted as sources of these kinds. If the texts must be misread in order to generate the arguments, that need be no concern of mine. As it happens, however, I think that – except in cases where I make explicit claims to the contrary – my readings actually do no violence to the texts in question; but aside from references to contemporary philosophical authorities, I make little or no attempt to substantiate this contention. Moreover, I do not claim that the value of these texts is exhausted by the use I make of them; that is, I claim no more than that part of what is on offer in these texts is arguments of the kind that I wish to investigate. Thus, for example, I have no quarrel here with one who wants to insist that the initial sections of St. Anselm's *Proslogion* provide much insight into the nature of God, or at least a particular Christian conception of God; my interest is solely in the question whether arguments generated from that text encode *a priori* reasons for me, or anyone else, to embrace that conception of God and/or to make judgments about the rationality of the various stances that I, or anyone else, could take with respect to that conception.

Some people will have further reservations about this "ahistorical, acontextual" approach to ontological arguments; for example, on one popular view, the historical context of an argument is an integral constituent of a proper analysis of that argument: Arguments are partly constituted by their function in the texts in which they appear and their place in the wider projects that they serve. I don't need to dispute the claim that a *complete* analysis of a part of a historical text must attend to the function which that part plays in the total text, the global project which that text is intended to serve, the historical context in which the text was written, and so on. However, as should already be clear, I have no interest in the project of providing a complete account of "ontological arguments" in this sense. My project involves merely the conceptual analysis of arguments – that is, sets of

3   These remarks were prompted by much appreciated comments from another anonymous reader at the press.

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sentences[4] in which one sentence is claimed to follow logically from the rest – not the complete analysis of written texts. By my lights, if a piece of text cannot be massaged into the form of an argument – that is, a set of sentences, one of which is claimed to follow logically from the rest – then it is simply incorrect to say that that text contains an argument. If you apply the term 'ontological argument' to pieces of text that cannot be massaged into the form of an argument, then we shall simply be talking at cross-purposes. Of course, as I have already suggested, it is important not to lose sight of the functions that arguments can serve; but these functions – which concern the rational revision of belief – need have nothing to do with the historical contexts of any texts that played a role in the construction of the arguments.

4 Strictly speaking, this talk of 'sets of sentences' is shorthand for more convoluted talk about sets of standardly interpreted sentences, i.e., sets of what are sometimes, perhaps misleadingly, called *statements* or *propositions*. The difficulty here is to make a more accurate claim that does not suggest a perhaps undesirable commitment to the existence of abstract entities associated with utterances or inscriptions of sentence-tokens.

Acknowledgments

THIS book was written while I held an Australian Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Research School for the Social Sciences at the Australian National University. I am indebted to the Australian Department of Employment, Education, and Training for awarding me this fellowship, and to the RSSS at ANU for the facilities that they made available. The Philosophy Department in RSSS is one of the best places in the world to do philosophy; I am grateful to all of the staff, students, and visitors who helped to make this the case during the time that I was writing this book. In particular, I should thank Nick Agar, David Armstrong, Michael Ayers, John Bishop, Simon Blackburn, David Braddon-Mitchell, Stuart Brock, John Broome, Mark Colyvan, Tim Dare, Michael Devitt, Brian Garrett, Moira Gatens, Tim van Gelder, Phillip Gerrens, Andrew Gleason, Alan Hajek, Kelly Hite, Dominic Hyde, Cathy Legg, Doug MacLean, Peter Menzies, Alex Miller, Joe Mintoff, Kevin Mulligan, Karen Neander, Graham Nerlich, John O'Leary-Hawthorne, Phillip Pettit, Ian Ravenscroft, Georges Rey, Denis Robinson, Judith Sellars, Jack Smart, Barry Taylor, Debbie Trew, Caroline West, Kevin Wilkinson, Susan Wolf, Tamara Zutlevics, and, especially, Frank Jackson and Michael Smith. Daniel Nolan read a near-final version of the manuscript; I am greatly indebted to him for his helpful critical comments and advice, which led to numerous improvements of the text. Audiences at RSSS, Wollongong and Sydney, also provided helpful critical comments; in particular, in addition to those already mentioned, I thank Susan Dodds, Robert Dunn, Stephen Gaukroger, Adrian Heathcote, George Molnar, Huw Price, Lloyd Reinhardt, Michael Shepanski, David Simpson, and Suzanne Uniacke. Thanks, too, to Ed Zalta for bringing Oppenheimer and Zalta (1991) to my attention.

Much of this book contains criticism of the work of others. However, it would be remiss of me not to record my debt to the writings

Acknowledgment

of many philosophers on the subject of ontological arguments. In particular, I have been greatly influenced by the excellent work of Robert Adams, John Barnes, William Forgie, David Lewis, George Mavrodes, Alvin Plantinga, Nathan Salmon, Michael Tooley, and Peter van Inwagen. A passing remark in Plantinga (1974b:86) provided part of the motivation for the book, namely, "I do not believe that any philosopher has ever given a cogent and conclusive refutation of the ontological argument in its various forms." One *aim* of this book is to provide such a "refutation"; how far it falls short of that aim I leave to the reader to judge.

I could not have written this book without the love and support of my family: my father, Ted; my brother, Ian; my sisters, Joan and Linda; and, especially, my wife, Camille, and my sons, Gilbert and Calvin.

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