

THE ROLE OF THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

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It is generally assumed that Descartes offers the ontological argument as a demonstration of the existence of God. In this paper, I shall argue that if we pay attention to the context of the argument, we can see that its principal role is not to establish God's existence. More generally, I want to show that traditional forms of the ontological argument were not directed towards the question of God's existence but toward the question of God's nature. Descartes is no exception, and his aim is to establish something about the nature of God, namely, his transcendence.

Kant, to whom we owe the term 'ontological argument', contrasted it with what he took to be the only other possible kinds of argument for the existence of God :

All the paths leading to this goal [proving the existence of God by means of speculative reason] begin either from determinate experience and the specific constitution of the world of sense as thereby known, and ascend from it, in accordance with the laws of causality, to the supreme cause outside the world; or they start from experience which is purely indeterminate, that is, from experience of existence in general; or finally they abstract from all experience, and argue completely *a priori*, from mere concepts, to the existence of a supreme cause. The first proof is the *physico-theological*, the second the *cosmological*, the third the *ontological*. There are, and there can be, no others.¹

There can be little doubt that Kant has identified genuinely different types of argument here. But what does the difference between each of these types of argument consist in? Do they, as Kant seems to assume, aim simply to provide separate routes—using different premisses, different types of argument—to establish the same conclusion, namely the existence of God?

The ontological argument can, of course, be used to try to convince someone of the existence of God, but it is not a particularly compelling argument if taken in this way. In its basic form, it can be set out

as follows. We can imagine a being that has every perfection, but existence is a perfection, so in imagining a being that has every perfection we are imagining a being that exists; indeed, must exist. Both the premisses and the argument-form can be questioned. As regards the first premiss, it is not at all clear that we can imagine a being that has every perfection. I can imagine a being that is perfectly just, for example, and I can imagine a being that is perfectly merciful, but I cannot imagine a being that is both perfectly just and perfectly merciful, for to be perfectly just commits one to punishing in accord with the law whereas being perfectly merciful commits one to punishing to a lesser extent than the law demands. Some perfections are incompatible with one another, so a being could not consistently have them all. As regards the second premise, the view among most philosophers is that existence is not on a par with the properties that a thing has; this doesn't make the second premiss false, of course, but it does make it controversial, and arguments that rely on controversial premisses are themselves thereby controversial. And as regards the argument form, it is unclear how we are supposed to generate the required conclusion. Assume, for the sake of the argument, that all perfections are compatible and consequently that incompatibility of perfections does not stand in the way of our imagining a being with every perfection; and assume likewise that existence is a property. How do we interpret the claim that 'we can imagine a being with every perfection?' One way we might do this is to say that it is possible for there to be a being with every perfection. But combined with the second premiss, this would merely tell us that *if* there were a being with every perfection, then because existence is a perfection, such a perfect being would (necessarily) exist. This does not establish the required conclusion, of course, which is that such a perfect being does (necessarily) exist.

I cannot believe that, at least in the late medieval/early modern period, the problems with the premisses went unrecognised. Aquinas had explicitly drawn attention to the problems surrounding the idea that existence is a property. Moreover, there was such a wide awareness of possible incompatibility of maximal properties through the case of the paradoxes of omnipotence—such as those paradoxes produced when we try to answer whether an omnipotent God can create a stone so heavy that He cannot lift it—that it is hard to imagine that the simple step to the incompatibility of perfections was not made. Nevertheless,

the question whether existence is a property has never been cut and dried, and there were ways of dealing with the paradoxes of omnipotence which perhaps could have inspired confidence that the incompatibility of perfections could have been dealt with along similar lines. Indeed, theologically, some solution would have to be found. It is not as if anyone was going to apply Aristotle's doctrine of the mean to God's perfections; somehow or other, God simply had to have any perfection worth having. What is not so straightforward is the commitment to the argument form.

To understand the commitment to the argument-form, we have to accord the first premiss a far greater degree of credence than we would now be inclined to. That there is something that has every perfection is, I suggest, a shared premiss, something that Anselm and Descartes, who will be our main concern, assume everyone will agree to as uncontentious. But if this is the case, what is the point of the ontological argument for them? There are three possibilities. First, its aim may be to show someone who does not believe in the existence of God that God exists. I have already suggested that it is not a powerful argument in this respect, and I shall argue that this is not the aim of the argument. A second possibility is that what it does is to show that God's existence, once granted, can be shown to be necessary. Yet if this is all it does, it achieves very little. For someone who unhesitatingly accepted that there is something that has every perfection, namely God, would be just as likely to unhesitatingly accept that God's existence is necessary. After all, the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is not a God who just happens, as a matter of fact, to exist. A third possibility, which I want to identify as the real role of the ontological argument in both Anselm and Descartes, is to establish some crucial feature or features that God must have. The argument must be placed not in the genre of proofs for the existence of God² in which, despite the enthusiastic reconstructions of some modern logicians, it fares very badly³ but in the genre of arguments about the nature of God. This latter genre has entirely disappeared from philosophical discussion, but I want to suggest that it was an active genre in both the medieval and early modern eras.

Spinoza's version of the argument

By way of softening up the reader, let us begin by looking

briefly at a version of the ontological argument which no one would characterize as being simply an argument for the existence of God. I have in mind Spinoza's version of the argument in Book I of the *Ethics*. The ontological argument is usually taken to show that there is at least one thing that exists, namely God. Spinoza notoriously places an unusually radical interpretation upon the argument: he believes that it also shows that there is at most one thing that exists, and hence, as he puts it in Proposition 14 of Book I of the *Ethics*, that 'there can be, or be conceived, no other substance than God'. The argument runs as follows. Spinoza defines God as 'substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence.'² God cannot be caused by anything else and hence must be *causa sui*; but if something is *causa sui* its essence must involve its existence. Therefore God necessarily exists. This part of the argument can be expressed in more traditional terminology, along these lines: God has every perfection, and not only can something that has every perfection not rely on something outside itself for its existence, but its existence is just one of its perfections. Then Spinoza moves to the wholly original part of the argument. There cannot be more than one substance, he tells us, because God expresses all the attributes of substance, and were something else to express one of these attributes (which it would have to were it to be a substance) then there would exist two substances with the same attribute, which is impossible, because attributes express essence, which is distinctive and unique.

What Spinoza is effectively doing here is saying that, if you follow through the logic of the ontological argument, you discover not the existence of God, which is not in question in the *Ethics*—which has no tuck with any form of scepticism, whether about the external world or God—, but that God is identical with the totality of what exists. The ontological argument is not being used so much to establish the existence of God, as to establish what the existence of God consists in; namely, God must be identified with the totality of what exists. In what follows I want to show that, although more orthodox in what they set out to establish, neither Anselm nor Descartes uses the ontological argument to establish the existence of God, in the sense of setting out an argument designed to convince someone who doubts or does not believe that God exists. They are concerned with the nature of God, and as a means of approaching this question

they establish that God's existence is such that He must have certain distinctive features. Again, the ontological argument is used not so much to establish God's existence as to offer an account of what God's existence consists in. This is clearly the case in Spinoza, where the role of the argument is less easily mistaken for just another proof of the existence of God because of the extremely unorthodox conclusion that he comes to. I shall argue that the fact that Anselm and Descartes come to far more orthodox conclusion should not disguise from us the fact that the argument is playing the same role.

Anselm's argument : a priori Christianity

In the second chapter of his *Proslogion*, Anselm quotes from the Psalms the famous passage 'the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God.'³ He then proceeds to offer a proof. It runs as follows. We can conceive of a greatest being; now if we compare two beings, one of which exists and the other which does not, but which are equally great or perfect in every other respect, then we can ask which of these is the greater, and we have to conclude that the first is the greater. Since it is greater to exist than not to exist, such a greatest being must exist : that is to say, in conceiving of it we are conceiving of something whose existence is necessary. The fool can only deny the existence of God by virtue of failing to realize that there is a contradiction in maintaining that he can imagine a greatest being and denying that that being exists : he can think the words, but not the thing.⁴

Presented like this, the argument looks like an attempt to convince a non-believer of the existence of God. But the devotional structure of the *Proslogion* suggests otherwise. As one recent commentator has pointed out, Anselm is

dealing here with the meditations of the faithful rather than with the convincing of unbelievers.... It is for this reason we must say that, in a sense, Anselm only 'appears' to be seeking to prove the existence of God. We have not yet arrived at a situation comparable with that which confronted eighteenth century apologists, for whom the individual who denies that there is a God is not a literary fiction, the 'Fool' of the Psalms, but a person who really needs to be convinced.⁵

Indeed, what seems to make the fool a fool is not so much the

fact that he does not believe in the existence of God, but the fact that he does not see the contradiction in his position. Anselm's claim is *not* that the ontological proof is one that even the fool cannot resist; he is not claiming that his argument is so compelling that even the fool will be convinced by it. he is saying that it is an argument that *only* a fool can resist, because only a fool can fail to grasp the logic of the argument.

But this raises the question of what exactly the proof is supposed to achieve, if not to convince the unbeliever; and why is this proof the one used? The Preface to the *Proslogion* provides us with a statement of Anselm's project. After having completed his *Monologion*, which covered the question of the nature of God, he reflected on the fact that 'this book was knit together by the linking of many arguments' and

I began to ask myself whether there might be found single argument which would require no other for its proof than itself alone; and alone would suffice to demonstrate that God truly exists, and that there is a supreme good requiring nothing else, which all other things require for their existence and well-being; and whatever we believe regarding the divine Being.⁶

The crucial phrase here the last one, for the 'single' argument that Anselm seeks is designed to secure not only the self-sufficient existence of God, but also 'whatever we believe regarding the divine Being'. The idea is not to convince someone who doesn't believe in God that there is a God, but to show that there is an argument for the existence of God which shows God to be the God of Christianity. And the *Monologion* makes it clear that the key doctrines here are those of the Trinity, the Incarnation and Redemption, indicating that it is Judaic and Muslim notions of God, rather than the existence of God as such, that is at issue.⁷ Having shown that God has no cause, Anselm goes on in the *Monologion* to show that He is the cause of everything else (chs.7-14), and that, amongst other characteristics, He is omnipresent and eternal, transcending substance (chs. 15-27); and finally that this single God, in expressing Himself through His Word, is a father whose son is the Word, and the love between the two is the Holy Spirit (chs. 28-79). The bulk of the argument, about two-thirds of it, is concerned to establish the doctrine of the Trinity on the basis of the understanding of God's nature arrived at in the earlier chapters.

The ontological argument is not the only way in which Anselm believed he could achieve his aim of demonstrating the Trinitarian nature of God, and in the *Monologion* the argument of the early chapters works in terms of the Platonic idea that we can find various degrees of perfection in the world, and that such degrees presuppose a standard of perfection, which Anselm goes on to identify with God, It was this argument that Anselm intended the ontological argument to replace, as being a more economical way of achieving his end. My point is not that the ontological argument is the only way to explore the nature of God philosophically, but that it provided Anselm with what he considered an especially suitable means for doing so.

Now even if one accepts that Anselm's aim is to establish basic theological truths about the nature of God, it will be pointed out that the way in which he does this proceeds via a proof for the existence of God. This proof, the ontological proof, can of course be separated from the main thrust of the argument and criticised, and the monk Gaulino immediately raised objections to this proof, as much later did Aquinas, neither believing our idea of God sufficient to establish his existence. Aquinas, who is concerned as far as possible to establish theology on an independent philosophical basis, wanted a sharper separation between philosophy and revelation than Anselm had hoped for, and he sees that the ontological argument is insufficient because its first premiss, the existence of a being with every perfection, is something that, while he accepted it without reservation, would not naturally be accepted by everyone. Not everyone understands by God 'that than which no greater can be thought', and many ancient thinkers maintained 'that the world is God.'⁸ It is the classical Greek philosophers rather than contemporaries that Aquinas is directing the argument towards here, and in this context, short of its aim of establishing revealed dogma on what is virtually an *a priori* basis, the status of Anselm's argument becomes simply that of establishing the existence of God, rather than that of establishing anything about the nature of God. And it manifestly fails to achieve the former, because it is now construed as something that would have to convince pagans of the existence of a perfect God, which, as Aquinas realises, it cannot do.

Descartes's Argument : A Transcendent God

Like Anselm, Descartes does not use the ontological argument

so much as a means to establish the existence of God as a means of establishing something about the nature of God. Descartes is concerned not with revealed theology, however, but with natural theology, and he is motivated not by religious questions, but by natural-philosophical ones.

Confining our attention to the *Meditations*, the ontological argument appears in Meditation 5.⁹ It takes a familiar form : God has every perfection, existence is a perfection, therefore God must exist. It is part of God's essence, as a supremely perfect being, to exist. The instructive thing about the fact that the ontological argument occurs so late in the *Meditations* is that Descartes has already provided us with two proofs of God's existence, in the third Meditation. The first¹⁰ invites us to reflect on the fact that we have an idea of God, and asks where we might have derived such an idea from : what is the cause of the idea? Going through the various possibilities, Descartes concludes that while he can attribute his ideas of other things to various sources, his idea of God is such that the only thing he can conceive of as being responsible for it is God Himself. The second¹¹ rests on two premisses, that causation is instantaneous and everything requires a cause. What is the cause of my present existence, Descartes asks? It cannot be something in the past, for causation is instantaneous, but I cannot find anything — that is, any power — in myself which would cause me to exist now, so the cause of my existence must be outside myself, and the only thing outside me that can put anything into existence is God.

The question this raises is why, if Descartes has already given us two proofs of the existence of God, he needs to provide a third? It is not that he considers the first two not to be compelling. The answer is, rather, that the ontological argument shows something different from the first two, a point obscured if we insist on construing the argument as being exclusively about the *existence* of God. What the ontological argument shows is that God's existence is transcendent. This can be brought out by comparing the ontological argument, which Descartes calls his *a priori* argument, with the first proof of God that he provided. The difference is that the first argument moves from a particular idea considered as an effect to the ultimate cause of that idea, whereas the *a priori* argument reflects on the content of the idea and considers the implications of that content for what the idea refers to. The *a*

priori proof is designed to reflect a feature of God which He would have even if He had created nothing, and it is unique in its ability to do this. We need to have an idea of God to be able to go through the *a priori* proof, but God's necessary existence is not dependent on my ability to prove it, and hence not dependent on the existence of my idea of God, or indeed the existence of anything other than Himself, whereas the proof of His existence as cause depends on His having caused something, and hence on something other than Him existing.

Why would Descartes want to demonstrate the transcendence of God? The context within which he was writing makes it clear why this was such a pressing issue. The transcendence of God was a key tenet of the mechanical philosophy that Descartes was pursuing.¹² The conception of nature that mechanism was formulated in reaction to, Renaissance naturalism, had undermined the sharp line that medieval philosophy and theology had tried to draw between the natural and the supernatural, encouraging a picture of nature as an essentially active realm, containing many hidden or 'occult' powers which could be tapped and exploited, as well as a conception of God as part of nature, as infused in nature, and not as something separate from His creation. This latter encouraged highly unorthodox doctrines that tended in the direction of pantheism, the modelling of divine powers on natural ones, and so on. Following Mersenne, Descartes had seen the source of the problem as lying in the construal of matter as being in some way active, and his solution is to offer a metaphysical version of mechanism the core doctrine of which is that matter is completely inert. The threat to established religion posed by naturalism was very significant, and Mersenne's and Descartes' solution was to cut them off at the root, by depriving them of the conception of matter on which they thrive. If there is no activity in matter then the supernatural will have to be invoked to explain any activity. The core of mechanism lies in its commitment of the inertness of nature, and this in turn is due to its ability to mark a clear separation between the natural and the supernatural, a separation thought through in terms of the inertness of matter and the transcendence of God. 'Atheism', in a modern sense, is not at issue. In his detailed arguments against the various forms of atheism in the 1620s, for example, Mersenne's targets—Charron, Cardano, Bruno, and others—all unequivocally and *explicitly*

believe in the existence of God. What was at stake was not the existence of God *per se*, even the God of Christianity, but whether there was a compelling form of rational argument, independent of faith, which showed the existence of *the right kind* of God. How it is clear from the rationale behind advocacy of mechanism that we find in Mersenne and Descartes that one thing the right kind of God had to be was a God who was transcendent, in the sense of being independent of His creation. The traditional Scholastic arguments had attempted to prove God's existence from manifest features of His creation, such as the harmony in nature. Such demonstrations did not distinguish between an immanent God and a transcendent one, but this had now become the key issue, as Mersenne's anti-naturalistic writings testify. Such a transcendent God is not only not part of His creation, but not in any way dependent upon it. Therefore, if transcendence was to be guaranteed from the outset, a proof of God was needed which did not tie His existence in any way to His creation. This is what Descartes' 'evident proof' sets out to provide, making God completely independent of anything He has in fact done.

Conclusion

On the reading I have offered, neither Anselm's nor Descartes' version of the ontological argument is primarily directed toward the question of simply showing that God exists. The argument was designed to tell us something about God, about what God is like for this, rather than the question of God's existence, was the contentious issue. In this respect, Anselm's and Descartes' versions of the argument are on a par with that of Spinoza. The difference is that Anselm and Descartes were concerned to establish orthodox conceptions of God against either non-Christian or naturalist versions, whereas Spinoza was concerned to establish a form of pantheism.

In more general terms, we must take seriously the question of what the point of an argument for the existence of God is in an age when atheism was not at issue: when what was at issue were, on the one hand, various forms of paganism. Judaism and Islam, and on the other, various doctrinal differences within Christianity. I have focused on the ontological argument, and showed that it should be viewed not in the context of arguments about whether God exists but in the context of arguments about what His existence consists in. Before

the Enlightenment (and indeed well into the Enlightenment), the problem was not whether God does or does not exist, but what the correct understanding of God is. The ontological argument is quite possibly not unique in this respect, and there is no reason to think, so far as I can tell, that the various other forms of argument for the existence of God are principally directed towards establishment something about God's nature rather than his existence—remember in this respect that Aquinas' 'four ways' are not directed against atheism but against pagan conceptions of God, and the aim was to establish the existence of a God that many pagans would not have accepted, namely a single God who was the creator of the universe. Once the question is raised seriously of whether God exists—that is to say, the question of whether there is a compelling proof of God's existence from premisses that would be accepted by those who do not believe in the existence of God—then all attention has to be focussed on the part of the project that secures God's existence, for without this the part of the argument that explores the nature of God clearly cannot go through. But the fact that we can never get past this stage once serious atheism is considered should not lead us to mistake the role of these arguments in ages in which serious atheism was not considered, or, worse, wonder why such unconvincing arguments could have been proposed. How convincing an argument is, is a function of what it is trying to do and whom it is trying to convince. The ontological argument, in particular, has been seriously misconstrued in this respect.

NOTES

1. *Critique of Pure Reason* A590-1/B618-9. Translation used : Norman Kemp Smith. *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (London : Macmillan, 1933).
2. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 1, def. 6. Translation used : Samuel Shirley, *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters* (Indianapolis : Hackett, 1992).

3. St. Anselm, *Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (2nd ed., La Salle, III : Open Court, 1962), 7.
4. *Ibid.* 9-10.
5. G. R. Evans, *Philosophy and Theology in the Middle Ages* (London : Routledge, 1993), 52.
6. Anselm, *op.cit.*, 1.
7. Anselm's arguments were in fact seen in this context in the later Middle Ages, and attention was drawn to their similarity to Lull's attempts to develop a completely compelling defence of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, to be used to convert Muslims and Jews. See Charles H. Lohr, 'Metaphysics', in Charles B. Schmitt *et al.*, eds., *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1988), 538-84, esp. 544.
8. Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 11.
9. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. and trans. John Cottingham *et al.* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1984), 46-7.
10. *Ibid.*, 26-32.
11. *Ibid.*, 33-4.
12. This question is pursued in detail in chs. 5 and 6 of my *Descartes : An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1995).