

Rethinking the Ontological Argument: A Neoclassical Theistic Response, by Daniel A. Dombrowski. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp.vii + 172. H/b

According to the dust-jacket blurb, Dombrowski's ambition is to "defend the ontological argument against its contemporary critics ... using a neoclassical or process concept of God". In particular, Dombrowski thinks that "Hartshorne's version of the ontological argument ... is especially worthy of defense" (1); and he also maintains that "Hartshorne's neoclassical concept of God is more likely than is a classical theistic concept to sustain Anselm's best insights regarding the necessity of God's existence" (5).

Although the book is quite short, it is very ambitious in scope. Its six chapters are: 1. *Historical Background*; 2. *Poetry versus the Ontological Argument: Richard Rorty's Challenge*; 3. *Deconstructionism and the Ontological Argument: The Case of Mark Taylor*; 4. *Is the Ontological Argument Worthless? Graham Oppy's Rejection*; 5. *Oppy, Perfect Islands, and Existence as a Predicate*; and 6. *Rival Concepts of God and the Ontological Argument: Thomas Morris, Katherine Rogers, and Alvin Plantinga*. Thus, in short compass, Dombrowski takes on a range of very different scholars with diverse theoretical orientations.

The main lines of Dombrowski's defense of "the ontological argument" are not easy to discern. Indeed, I think that it is very hard to guess what Dombrowski might mean by the expression "the ontological argument". There are only two ontological arguments that Dombrowski sets out in his text and of which he speaks approvingly. The first is at p.14, and is taken from a letter written to Dombrowski by Donald Viney:

1. "God" means "that than which nothing greater can be thought"
2. The idea of God is not contradictory.
3. That which can be thought of as not existing (a contingent being) is not as great as then which cannot be thought of as not existing (a necessary being)
4. Therefore, to think of God as possibly not existing (as contingent) is not to think of the greatest conceivable being. It is a contradiction to think of the greatest conceivable being as non-existent.
5. Therefore, God exists.

And the second, based on an argument from George Goodwin's 2003 article "De Re Modality and the Ontological Argument" (in G. Shields, ed., *Process and Analysis*, Albany: State University of New York), is at p.96:

1. Modality of existence is a predicate.
2. The existence of God is either necessary or impossible (due to the logic of perfection).
3. The existence of God is possible. (Conclusion from other theistic arguments, including the argument from religious experience.)
4. Therefore, the existence of God is necessary. (From 1, 2, and 3.)

In the second of these arguments, the first premise is plainly redundant. After the omission of this premise, what remains is a very simple, standard modal ontological argument: *God's existence is either necessary or impossible; God's existence is not impossible; so God's existence is necessary*. I doubt that I will be alone in thinking that there is very little to be said on behalf of this argument. Nonetheless, there is even less to be said on behalf of the first “argument”. As it stands, the status of the second sentence at line 4 is quite unclear: is it a reformulation of the interim conclusion, or a further consequence of the interim conclusion, or what? Perhaps the intended argument is as follows: “*God*” means “*that than which nothing greater can be conceived*”; *the idea of God is not contradictory; that which can be thought of as not existing is not as great as that which cannot be thought of as not existing; so God exists*. But, if that’s the argument then it seems to me that the argument is plainly invalid (no matter how the rather slippery expression “thought of as” is understood).

Since Dombrowski makes particular mention of “Hartshorne’s version of the ontological argument”, it might be supposed that there is an argument in Hartshorne that he particularly means to defend. Perhaps, for example, the argument that Hartshorne gives in *The Logic of Perfection* (La Salle: Open Court Publishing, 1973, at p.50f.)? But, no, *that* argument has as its first premise the claim that, if God exists, then it is necessary that God exists; and yet Dombrowski insists—following Hartshorne in “Replies to ‘Interrogations of Charles Hartshorne, Conducted by William Alston’ (in Sydney Rome ed. *Philosophical Interrogations* New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1964, at p.347)—that it is self-contradictory to say that, if God exists, then it is necessary that God exists! Moreover, this is not a mere slip: Dombrowski has an extensive discussion of the alleged deficiencies of the claim that, if God exists then it is necessary that God exists, at pp.103, 108, and elsewhere.

There are other things that Dombrowski says that contribute to the difficulties surrounding the interpretation of his use of the label “the ontological argument”. For instance, at p.20, he writes: “It is better, I think, to keep all of the complex factors involved in the ontological argument on the table. This makes it possible for a defender of the argument to bring different factors to the fore when needed, depending on dialectical or rhetorical context.” If we think—as we should—that the relevant sense of “argument” *identifies* arguments by their premises and conclusions, then we will find it very hard to know what to make of the “complex factors” to which Dombrowski is here adverting. Moreover, as this quote also suggests, there are difficulties involved in understanding what Dombrowski supposes is involved in the “defence” of an argument. Dombrowski does make it clear that he supposes that there are sound modal ontological arguments. But, echoing Robert Oakes, he also writes, at p.90: “How could a completely worthless argument be believed by some rational parties to be sound?” Well, consider the arguments: “God exists, so God exists” and “God doesn’t exist, so God doesn’t exist”. Taking classical logic for granted, rational theists are committed to saying that the former argument is sound, and rational atheists are committed to saying that the latter argument is sound. Yet nobody on either side of this dispute could suppose that either of these arguments has any worth *qua* argument.

I suspect—though perhaps uncharitably—that Dombrowski is inclined to conflate *argument* with *theory*. What he really wants to defend is a neoclassical *theory* of God, i.e. a theory according to which God is the necessarily existent World Soul of process theology. However, he seems to suppose that one could only be a proponent of a neoclassical theory of God if one were also a proponent of some kind of modal ontological argument; and he also seems to suppose that there are modal ontological arguments that lend particular support to process theology. If this is what he supposes, then it seems to me to be plainly mistaken on both counts. On the one hand, I have never come across a modal ontological argument that has a conclusion that is specific to process theology: rather, the conclusion of these arguments is always that there is a perfect being, or a being than which none greater can be conceived, or the like. (The difference between classical theists and process theists lies in their understanding of the expressions “perfect being”, “being than which none greater can be conceived” and the like—but those differences don’t bear on the argumentative virtues of the modal ontological arguments themselves.) And, on the other hand, while it is doubtless true that those who adopt the kind of neoclassical theory of God that Dombrowski endorses will wish to suppose that there are *sound* modal ontological arguments, I see no reason at all to think that those people need to suppose that there are *good* modal ontological arguments (i.e., at a minimum, modal ontological arguments that have argumentative virtues beyond those possessed by the argument *Either two and two are five or God exists, two and two are not five, therefore God exists*).

There is not space in the compass of this review to discuss the very many shortcomings that I find in Dombrowski’s book. While the book contains much material on the treatment of modal ontological arguments by contemporary process philosophers—George Goodwin, Billy Joe Lucas, George Shields, Edgar Towne, Donald Viney—that I had not previously encountered, I do not think that the book does anything at all to advance the view that Hartshorne “refuted atheism” (123). And, while I cannot speak for the other philosophers whose work is subjected to Dombrowski’s critique, I should say that, in my own case, Dombrowski is not a very accurate expositor of my views, frequently making hash with quotations taken out of context and the like. Books on ontological arguments are so few in number that I am sorry not to be able to speak more highly of this one.

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