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Source: *Religious Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Mar., 1979), pp. 91-97

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20005544>

Accessed: 25-10-2018 13:18 UTC

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PLANTINGA'S GOD AND OTHER
MONSTROSITIES

In *God, Freedom, and Evil*,¹ Alvin Plantinga presents a new form of the ontological argument for the existence of God. Though he has reservations concerning its evangelical efficacy, Plantinga considers the proof both valid and sound, and presents it as a defence of the rational acceptability of theism.

In the noble tradition of Gaunilo and others,² I hope to use unserious parody to raise serious doubts.

I

A. Plantinga's argument is as follows:

(1) There is a possible world in which maximal greatness is instantiated.

(2) Necessarily, a being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every world.

(3) Necessarily, a being has maximal excellence in every world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in every world.

But if (1) is true, then there is a possible world W such that if it had been actual, then there would have existed a being that was omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect; this being, furthermore, would have had these qualities in every possible world. So it follows that if W had been actual, it would have been impossible that there be no such being. That is, if W had been actual,

(n) There is no omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being would have been an impossible proposition. But if a proposition is impossible in at least one possible world, then it is impossible in every possible world; what is impossible does not vary from world to world. Accordingly (n) is impossible in the *actual* world, i.e., impossible *simpliciter*. But if it is impossible that there is no such being, then there actually exists a being that is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect; this being, furthermore, has these qualities essentially and exists in every possible world.³

Plantinga's commentary does the work of these three additional steps:

(4) 'There is no omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being' is impossible in at least one possible world.

¹ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

² Gaunilo's *On Behalf of the Fool* is an eleventh-century parody of Anselm's original form of the argument. See also David Haight and Marjorie Haight, 'An Ontological Argument for the Devil', *The Monist* LV, 2 (April 1970).

³ Alvin Plantinga, *op. cit.* pp. 111-12.

(5) If a proposition is impossible in at least one possible world, then it is impossible in every possible world.

(6) Therefore there is in our world and in every world an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being.

B. For clarity's sake, we might expand slightly the representation of Plantinga's argument above. What lies behind the first premise is the following:

(1'a) It is possible that there is a maximally great being (something that is maximally great).

Plantinga rejects such a phrasing out of scruples over 'possible beings', despite the fact that 'possible properties' would seem no less suspicious and despite the fact that (1'a) entails only that it is possible that there is a being of a certain description, not that there is a certain 'possible being'. Nonetheless, (1'a) seems to represent an untechnical phrasing of the central premise, and in fact Plantinga later restates (1) as maintaining 'that the existence of a maximally great being is possible'.¹

We might thus represent the first premise in two steps, as follows:

(1'a) It is possible that there is a maximally great being (something that is maximally great).

(1'b) So there is a possible world in which 'maximal greatness' is instantiated.

The virtue of such an expansion is simply clarity, and if it has vices they are ones which I will not rely on in critique of the argument.

We might also, for the sake of clarity, insert a step between (3) and (4):

(7) Something has maximal excellence in a given world only if it exists in that world, and something is maximally great only if it exists in every world.

(7) in fact follows from (2) and (3): 'For obviously a being can't be omnipotent (or for that matter omniscient or morally perfect) in a given world unless it *exists* in that world.'² The inclusion of (7) thus adds nothing to the premises outlined, although it does make the movement of the proof a bit easier to see.

Plantinga's argument is one of the cleverest to date for the existence of God; both (2) and (3) are definitional, and both (1'a) and its translation as (1'b) appear innocuous. I think nonetheless that there is something seriously amiss with the argument or Plantinga's claims for it, and that parody may indicate its weakness.

II

A. Plantinga admits in *The Nature of Necessity*³ that it is fairly easy to construct demonstrations the conclusions of which contradict the major premise of his proof. He presents one such demonstration in a much abbreviated form:

¹ *Ibid.* p. 112.

² *Ibid.* p. 108.

³ Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

(8) No-maximality (the property of being such that there is no maximally great being) is possibly exemplified.

(9) If no-maximality is possibly exemplified, then maximal greatness is impossible.

(10) Therefore maximal greatness is impossible.

If such an argument is sound, of course, Plantinga's major premise in the original proof is false. If (8) is as rationally acceptable as (1) and if Plantinga is right in asserting that his demonstration establishes the rational acceptability of theism, moreover, it would appear that the demonstration above establishes the rational acceptability of the belief that Plantinga's proof relies on a false premise.

(8) through (10) do not, however, constitute a disproof of the existence of God as he appears in the conclusion of Plantinga's proof. On Plantinga's definitions, the non-existence of a maximally great being is consistent with the existence of a maximally excellent being in some world or in every world. A strict disproof of the existence of God parallel to Plantinga's proof would have to take something more like the following form:

(11a) It is possible that there is a total lack of fantastic beings.

(11b) So there is a possible world in which there is a total lack of fantastic beings.

(12) Necessarily, there is a total lack of fantastic beings in any world only if there is a lack of fantastic beings in every world.

(13) Necessarily, a being is fantastic if it is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.

(14) 'There is an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being' is impossible in at least one possible world.

(5) If a proposition is impossible in at least one possible world, then it is impossible in every possible world.

(15) Therefore there is not in our world or in any world an omnipotent, omniscient, or morally perfect being.

Here (12) and (13) are definitional and operate roughly as do Plantinga's (2) and (3), the argument from that point on parallels his very closely, and (11) has all the apparent innocence of Plantinga's (1). It might be objected, however, that this disproof somehow involves treating a lack as a thing in its own right and moreover that the lack at issue is some strange sort of superlack. A superlack seems no more suspicious to me than the superthing which appears in Plantinga's proof, and I am simply envious of those who suffer no real lacks. Nonetheless, it should be noted that those objections can be circumvented by complicating the disproof somewhat:

(16a) It is possible that there is something which is normal.

(16b) So there is a possible world in which normality is instantiated.

(17) Necessarily, something is normal only if it is exempt from fantastic beings in every world.

(18) Necessarily, a being is exempt from fantastic beings in every world only if there are no fantastic beings in any world.

(19) Necessarily, a being is fantastic if it is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.

From this point we can appeal to (14), (5), and (15) in order to complete the disproof as before.

It might finally be objected that this second form of the disproof rids us of God only at the cost of setting up another necessary being, but that difficulty too can be avoided if we substitute (17') and (18') for (17) and (18):

(17') Necessarily, something is normal only if it is totally exempt from fantastic beings.

(18') Necessarily, something is totally exempt from fantastic beings only if there are no fantastic beings in any world.

Corresponding virtues, I think, can be claimed for Plantinga's proof and the disproof above. (17), (18), and (19) are as definitional as Plantinga's (2) and (3), and seem no more fantastic. Neither first premise seems *a priori* preferable, and there appear to be no other significant differences between them. Though both cannot be sound, both might be either valid or invalid. If Plantinga is right in asserting that his demonstration establishes the rational acceptability of theism, moreover, it appears that the correlate disproof above establishes the rational acceptability of atheism which in Plantinga's terms would accomplish at least one of the aims of natural atheology. As R. L. Purtill notes in 'Plantinga, Necessity, and God', the existence of an equally rational theism and atheism suggests that a suspension of judgment is perhaps more rational than either.¹

The importance of the proof and disproof above for agnosticism of other forms is perhaps worthy of note. One might have thought that 'it is possible that such things exist' and 'it is possible that such things do not exist' were not only consistent but perhaps informally implied each other in a Gricean manner. Given Plantinga's definitions, however, and if the same sense of 'possible' is at issue, 'it is possible that there is a being maximally excellent (or omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect) in all worlds, and possible there is not' is straightforwardly inconsistent. Given the definitions of the disproof, the same applies to 'it is possible that there is a being exempt from fantastic beings in all worlds, and possible there is not'. Oddly enough, however, a similar agnosticism is perfectly consistent concerning maximally excellent beings, beings exempt from fantastic beings, or omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect beings which may be such in only one 'possible world'.

B. Plantinga's proof, however, is subject to much more serious parody than a parallel disproof. Putting aside for the moment such things as omniscience and moral perfection, consider the following as the 'skeleton' of an argument:

R. L. Purtill, 'Plantinga, Necessity, and God', *New Scholastic*, Winter 1976, pp. 46-60.

(20a) It is possible that there is a Yx (some x which is Y).

(20b) So there is a possible world in which Yx -ness (or simply Y -ness) is instantiated.

(21) Necessarily, something is Y only if it is Z in every world.

(22) Necessarily, something is Z in every world only if it exists in every world.

(23) 'There is no Zx ' is impossible in at least one possible world.

(24) Therefore there is in our world and in every world a Zx .

The relation of such a sketch to Plantinga's proof and my disproof above is fairly obvious. Substituting 'being' for ' x ', 'maximally great' for ' Y ', and 'maximally excellent' for ' Z ', we come very close to Plantinga's original. One form of the disproof can be produced by substituting 'being' for ' x ', 'normal' for ' Y ', and 'exempt from fantastic beings' for ' Z '.

What is most intriguing about the 'skeletal' argument is that an enormous range of substitutions are possible for ' Y ' and ' Z '; the only real constraint is that imposed by (21). Amusing candidates for substitution, other than 'maximal greatness' and 'maximal excellence', include 'maximal malignancy', 'maximal obnoxiousness', 'maximal indifference', and 'maximal illiteracy'. In each case we need simply let (21) define an essential characteristic of the relevant 'maximal'.¹

Thus a proof of the existence of the maximally uninformed being might run as follows:

(25a) It is possible that there is a maximally ignorant being.

(25b) So there is a possible world in which maximal ignorance is instantiated.

(26) Necessarily, something is maximally ignorant only if it is maximally uninformed in every world.

(27) Necessarily, something is maximally uninformed in every world only if it exists in every world.

(28) 'There is no maximally uninformed being' is impossible in at least one possible world.

(5) If a proposition is impossible in at least one possible world, then it is impossible in every possible world.

(29) Therefore there is in our world and in every world a maximally uninformed being.

C. It should also be clear, I think, that we need not tie ourselves to maximals in substitutions for ' Y ' and ' Z '. We may allow Yx to be merely something special, rather than fully maximal, and include (21) in defining 'special' in our special sense. By so doing, we can construct demonstrations similar to Plantinga's original but for the existence of such monstrosities as unicorns,

¹ Plantinga rejects Gaunilo's parodies of Anselm on the grounds that the qualities which make for greatness in islands and the like have no 'intrinsic maximum'. My parodies are designed to avoid such an objection either by appealing to qualities which as plausibly have an 'intrinsic maximum' as those which Plantinga gives his God or by concentrating merely on 'specials' and avoiding 'maximals' altogether.

harpies, centaurs, and satyrs as well as such dubious creatures as the Loch Ness Monster and the Abominable Snowman. The argument for the existence of gryphons thus runs as follows:

(30a) It is possible that there is a special gryphon (something which is a special gryphon).

(30b) So there is a possible world in which special gryphonness is instantiated.

(31) Necessarily, something is a special gryphon only if it is a gryphon in every world.

(32) Necessarily, something is a gryphon in every world only if it exists in every world.

(33) 'There are no gryphons' is impossible in at least one possible world.

(5) If a proposition is impossible in at least one possible world, then it is impossible in every possible world.

(34) Therefore there is a gryphon in our world and in every world.

D. The ease with which we can thus populate the universe with members of what we thought were empty phyla is rather startling. More startling conclusions still follow when we group conclusions from several demonstrations. Consider two demonstrations, similar to those above and to Plantinga's original, for two different leprechauns:

(35a) It is possible that there is a special red leprechaun (something which is a special red leprechaun).

(35b) So there is a possible world in which special red leprechaunism is instantiated.

(36) Necessarily, something is a special red leprechaun only if in every world it is a red leprechaun, of no other colour, that can destroy all other leprechauns and can be destroyed by no others.

(37) Necessarily, something is a red leprechaun in every world only if it exists in every world.

(38) 'There is no red leprechaun, of no other colour, that can destroy all other leprechauns and can be destroyed by no others' is impossible in at least one possible world.

(5) If a proposition is impossible in at least one possible world, then it is impossible in every possible world.

(39) Therefore there is in our world and in every world a red leprechaun, of no other colour, that can destroy all other leprechauns and can be destroyed by no others.

So far so good; we simply have one more attraction in our menagerie. But consider also the following:

(41) It is possible that there is a special green leprechaun (something which is a special green leprechaun).

(40b) So there is a possible world in which special green leprechaunism is instantiated.

(41) Necessarily, something is a special green leprechaun only if in every world it is a green leprechaun, of no other colour, that can destroy all other leprechauns and can be destroyed by no others.

(42) Necessarily, something is a green leprechaun in every world only if it exists in every world.

(43) 'There is no green leprechaun, of no other colour, that can destroy all other leprechauns and can be destroyed by no others' is impossible in at least one possible world.

(5) If a proposition is impossible in at least one possible world, then it is impossible in every possible world.

(44) Therefore there is in our world and in every world a green leprechaun, of no other colour, that can destroy all other leprechauns and can be destroyed by no others.

We now have on our hands two distinct leprechauns, one red and the other green, which mysteriously both can and cannot destroy each other. The proofs might be repeated for distinct things that go bump in the night and both can and cannot tie each other's shoelaces, or marry and divorce each other, or show each other a good time.

III

I will not attempt here to draw a straightforward logical moral from Plantinga's proof and its parodies above. My suspicions are that the modal logician's 'possible' on which the arguments rely is only a very distant relative of the English 'possible' with which we are bound initially to confuse it, but there may be other complications as well. The more valuable and demanding investigation of such possibilities I leave to another paper or to others.

I have attempted to parody Plantinga's argument, but have not attacked it directly as either invalid or unsound. But Plantinga makes an additional claim regarding his premise (1) and his argument as a whole which appears more directly weakened by parody.

Still, it is evident, I think, that there is nothing *contrary to reason* or *irrational* in accepting this premise. What I claim for the argument, therefore, is that it establishes, not the *truth* of theism, but its rational acceptability. And hence it accomplishes at least one of the aims of the tradition of natural theology.¹

I see no reason to think that the acceptance of parallels to Plantinga's (1) involving not a maximally great being but, say, a maximally indifferent being or merely special satyrs or abominable snowmen, is any more or less *contrary to reason* or *irrational* than is the acceptance of (1). Thus either the existence of such monstrosities is as rationally acceptable as is the existence of Plantinga's God or else Plantinga's claims for his proof are much too strong.²

¹ Alvin Plantinga, *op. cit.* p. 112.

² This paper was revised under the auspices of a Mellon Faculty Fellowship administered by Washington University.