

## Introduction: Ontological Arguments in Focus

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Ontological arguments are arguments for the existence of God. The label ‘ontological argument’ was introduced by Immanuel Kant, who identified three major proofs of the existence of God: ‘the ontological argument’, ‘the cosmological argument’, and ‘the teleological argument’. While cosmological arguments and teleological arguments were developed in the earliest stages of the history of philosophy—for example, in the West, there are cosmological arguments in Plato’s *Laws* and Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, and there are teleological arguments in Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Phaedo*—ontological arguments did not appear on the scene until the eleventh century CE. Moreover, while there have been periods of widespread endorsement of cosmological arguments and teleological arguments, there has never been a time at which there has been widespread endorsement of ontological arguments. However, some of the greatest figures in Western Philosophy—including Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Hegel, and (for a brief period) Bertrand Russell—have been proponents of ontological arguments, and there has been significant support for ontological arguments in some quarters of the Western academy since the middle of the twentieth century CE.

Much about ontological arguments is highly controversial. In this *Introduction*, we begin with two relatively uncontroversial matters: the broad contours of the history of discussion of ontological arguments, and the major topics that require discussion in connection with ontological arguments. We then move on to consideration of the much more difficult task of the characterisation of ontological arguments—i.e. the task of saying exactly what

ontological arguments are and explaining how they differ from, say, cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments for the existence of God—and then the equally contested question of the provision of general objections to ontological arguments, including, in particular, attempts to show that there could not possibly be a successful ontological argument. Finally, we consider some often-neglected questions about how to assess the merits of arguments, with a particular eye on the assessment of the merits of ontological arguments.

## 1. History

The pivotal text on ontological arguments, the work on which all subsequent literature depends, is Anselm's *Proslogion*. The text of *Proslogion II*—the centrepiece of the work, discussed in the present volume by Peter Millican—has puzzled and inspired generations of philosophers; its interpretation and assessment remains deeply controversial. The text of *Proslogion III*—while not, I think, intended as an argument for the existence of God—has also puzzled and inspired generations of philosophers, leading eventually, in the work of Charles Hartshorne and Alvin Plantinga, to the development of a new family of (modal) ontological arguments.

The argument of *Proslogion II* was met with immediate criticism. In 1079—the year following the publication of the *Proslogion*—Gaunilo of Marmoutiers attempted to show that the argument of *Proslogion II* did not succeed in proving that God exists. While Gaunilo's critique, and Anselm's reply to that critique, seem not to be always on target, Gaunilo did establish one enduring kind of response to ontological arguments: many have since followed him in supposing that ontological arguments can be parodied in ways which conclusively

show that there are not successful proofs of the existence of God. Famously, Gaunilo provided a parody of Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument which purported to establish the existence of the 'Lost Island': an island superior everywhere in abundance of riches to all those lands that actually exist.

Despite Gaunilo's immediate response, Anselm's argument passed into a lengthy period of obscurity, from which it emerged not long before Aquinas subjected it to criticism which is discussed in the present volume by Brian Leftow. *Proslogion II* and *Proslogion III* are both objects of Aquinas' attention, e.g. in his commentary on Lombard's *Sentences*, in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, and in the *Summa Theologiae*. Roughly speaking, Aquinas thinks that, while there is a sense in which God's existence is self-evident, and while it is also true that God's existence can be demonstrated to us, Anselm's argument fails to be a demonstration of God's existence. Given only the considerations to which the *Proslogion II* argument appeals, there is no inconsistency in the Fool's claim that there is no being than which none greater can be conceived.

At least from the time of Aquinas' criticism, Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument was a staple of discussion for medieval philosophers. However, the next major event in the history of ontological arguments was Descartes' various attempts, discussed in the present volume by Lawrence Nolan, to argue that the existence of God—a supremely perfect being—is given in intuition and so is ultimately self-evident. The various works in which Descartes broaches this topic—*The Discourse on Method* (1637), *The Meditations* (1641), The First, Second, and Fifth *Replies to the Objections in the Meditations*, and *The Principles* (1644)—have puzzled and inspired philosophers in much the same way as Anselm's *Proslogion II*; the interpretation and assessment of these texts remains deeply controversial. The First Objector,

Caterus, supposes that Descartes' argumentative moves can be parodied in ways that utterly discredit them. The Second Objector, Mersenne, raises legitimate concerns about whether we can have the kinds of intuitions that Descartes supposes make it evident to us that God exists. The Fifth Objector, Gassendi, provides criticisms that anticipate Kant's famous attempt to defeat what are now typically called 'Cartesian ontological arguments'.

Descartes' views on the demonstration of the existence of God were much discussed by his successors, including More, Malebranche, Cudworth, Spinoza and Clarke. However, the next major episode in the history of ontological arguments was Leibniz's attempt, discussed in the present volume by Maria Rosa Antognazza, to fill what Leibniz—following in the footsteps of Mersenne—took to be a hole in Cartesian ontological arguments. Given the way that Leibniz proposed to construct his ontological argument, he needed a proof that the perfections are possibly jointly instantiated. The line of inquiry that Leibniz pursued eventually paved the way to Gödel's development of his higher-order modal ontological argument.

Descartes' views on the demonstration of the existence of God continued to be discussed after Leibniz: Wolff and Baumgarten both defended 'Cartesian ontological arguments', and Crusius provided them with criticism, which, to some extent, anticipated the next major step in the history of ontological arguments, taken by Kant, and discussed in the present volume by Lawrence Pasternack. As part of his systematic attack on the arguments of natural theology, Kant eventually—in *The Critique of Pure Reason*—provided a multi-pronged attack on what he there was the first to call 'the ontological argument'. Kant's most famous objection—that 'existence is not a real predicate'—initially advanced in *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, immediately became *the*

standard criticism of ontological arguments, or, at any rate, of ontological arguments that were known to Kant.

Hegel refused to accept Kant's criticism of 'the ontological argument'. Moreover, Hegel provided his own defence of 'the ontological argument', discussed in the present volume by Michael Inwood. Hegel's claim that there is a successful ontological argument was accepted by many for at least one hundred years after his initial staking out of the claim. However, as has been widely recognised, Hegel has a rather idiosyncratic conception of proof, and, perhaps, an even more idiosyncratic conception of God. Nonetheless, Hegel's courses of lectures on 'the ontological argument' have provided a very rich resource for subsequent students of ontological arguments.

After Hegel, there was a long period in which there were few innovations in discussion of ontological arguments. That is not to say that the arguments were ignored: Bertrand Russell reported that, for a brief period, he was converted to theism by a Hegelian ontological argument; and, throughout the Idealist age, there were many affirmations of the value of ontological arguments. But the next significant episode in the history of ontological arguments, discussed in the present volume by Alexander Pruss, was Kurt Gödel's 'systematisation' of the argument that was developed by Leibniz, which—eventually—launched investigation of a new family of (higher-order [modal]) ontological arguments. Gödel's work—which took advantage of developments in logic for which he was, himself, partly responsible—introduced a new level of sophistication to the formulation of ontological arguments.

Before Gödel's work became publicly available—i.e. while it was simply sitting in his notebooks—there were two other significant advances in understanding of ontological arguments. The first of these advances, discussed in the present volume by Michael Almeida, was made by David Lewis, as an application of his theory of metaphysical modality. Lewis considered the representation of Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument in a language in which there is direct quantification over possible worlds, and arrived at the interesting conclusion that the argument admits of two quite distinct readings, one of which is invalid, and the other of which contains a premise that is evidently question-begging. This idea proved very influential in the subsequent literature. (Interestingly, in his analysis of the *Proslogion II* argument in this volume, Peter Millican finds that there are three quite distinct readings of the argument: one that is invalid, one that is evidently question-begging, and one that fails to establish the existence of anything divine.)

The other advance in understanding of ontological arguments that occurred prior to the publication of Gödel's notebooks was the development, by Charles Hartshorne and Norman Malcolm, of (modal) ontological arguments that they 'found' in *Proslogion III*. The kind of argument that they developed found its most impressive presentation, discussed in the present volume by Josh Rasmussen, in the work of Alvin Plantinga, primarily in his 1974 book, *The Nature of Necessity*. Plantinga, while accepting that his modal ontological argument is not a proof of the existence of God, nonetheless maintains that it is a 'victorious' argument: it shows that it is rational to accept the claim that God exists.

The final chapter in our history of ontological arguments requires some further scene-setting. In the last part of the nineteenth century, in Austria, work began on what we might call 'theories of non-existent objects'. On its face, Anselm's *Proslogion II* requires a background

theory of non-existent objects. Those—such as Alexius Meinong, John Findlay, Richard Sylvan (ne Routley), Terence Parsons, Graham Priest, and Ed Zalta—who have participated in the development of theories of non-existent objects have *all* argued that successful ontological arguments cannot be developed in the context of those theories. Pavel Tichý provided an interesting alternative to theories of non-existent objects—through a comprehensive metaphysics of *roles* or *offices*—laid out in the present volume by Graham Oddie. Unlike almost all other authors Tichý takes Anselm’s argument in *Proslogion III* as the more promising starting point, and argues that it is not vulnerable to the well-known objections levelled by Kant and Frege against Descartes’ argument, or that can be laid against Anselm’s argument in *Proslogion II*. Tichý argues that while Anselm’s argument in *Proslogion III* is logically valid, a key axiological premise—that necessary existence is a good property—is deeply implausible. Oddie digs deeper into the assumptions that Anselm could appeal to, and concludes that there is no plausible way of repairing them to yield a logically and axiologically sound ontological argument.

## **2. Topics**

One part of the perennial fascination of ontological arguments is that adequate discussion of ontological arguments requires taking up a number of intrinsically interesting philosophical topics. This volume is rounded out by discussion of three of these intrinsically interesting topics.

The first topic, discussed in the present volume by Joshua Spencer, and of particular interest both in the context of assessment of the claim that it is possible that God exists and in the context of the interpretation of Anselm’s *Proslogion II*, concerns the connections between

conceivability and possibility. Many philosophers have been tempted by some version of the thought that what they can conceive provides them with some evidence about what is possible. Given some version of that thought, we might then be tempted to suppose that conceiving of God's existence provides some evidence that it is possible that God exists; and we might also be tempted to suppose that we can reinterpret Anselm's 'conceiving'-talk as 'possibility'-talk.

The second topic, discussed in the present volume by Peter van Inwagen, and raised in connection with every ontological argument, concerns the nature of the alleged fallacy of begging the question. It is very common to hear people say that a particular ontological argument begs the question; it is not so uncommon to hear people say that 'the ontological argument' begs the question. But what, exactly, is it for an argument to be question-begging? This is a surprisingly difficult, and, I think, not very well understood, question. It is not hard to see, for example, that an argument that has its conclusion as one of its premises is not a successful argument. However, no interesting ontological arguments suffer from that defect. It is also not hard to see, for example, that we should not want to say that every valid argument is circular. Yet is surprisingly tricky to find a criterion for argumentative question-begging that neither entails that all valid arguments beg the question nor entails that the only arguments that beg the question are those that are transparently and obviously deficient in the way of arguments that have their conclusion as one of their premises.

The third topic was introduced above, in the examination of the last chapter in the history of ontological arguments, and is discussed in the present volume by Graham Priest. The conclusion of ontological arguments is an existence claim: either it is the claim that God exists, or it is a conclusion that is taken to evidently and immediately entail that God exists.



Moreover, it is very often the case that premises in ontological arguments are also ‘existence’ claims, i.e. claims in which the concept of existence—or a cognate concept of, say, being—is deployed. But the interpretation and analysis of the concept of existence—and cognate concepts such as being—is a fascinating and intimidating topic in its own right. Any theorising about existence and non-existence takes us into very deep water in both philosophy of language and metaphysics.

Of course, there are other topics that are important for the examination of ontological arguments. In particular, given that ontological arguments are arguments, the full investigation of ontological arguments requires some theory of argumentation, and some account of what it is for an argument to be successful. It is important to see, for example, that we cannot just be interested in determining, to our own satisfaction, which arguments are sound. Consider, for example, the following pair of arguments:

1. Necessarily, if God exists, then, necessarily, God exists. (Premise)
2. Possibly God exists. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) God exists. (From 1 and 2, by S5.)

1. Necessarily, if God exists, then, necessarily, God exists. (Premise)
2. Possibly God does not exist. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) God does not exist. (From 1 and 2, by S5.)

One of these arguments is valid just in case the other is valid. (If, for example, we suppose that S5 is the modal logic in employment, then both are valid.) Moreover, these arguments share the same first premise. So, if we are to suppose that only one of them is sound, it will

be because we accept the second premise in one, and deny the second premise in the other. So—holding fixed the various things that we've supposed to this point—we can see that theists will suppose that the first argument is sound, and atheists will suppose that the second argument is sound, and agnostics will be undecided about which of the two arguments is sound. Given that we already knew that theists, atheists, and agnostics divide in their attitudes towards the proposition that God exists, these arguments have done nothing to advance the state of anyone's knowledge. Moreover, insofar as theists, atheists, and agnostics are rational, these arguments can do nothing to advance the state of anyone's knowledge. That we have satisfied ourselves that an argument is sound is not enough to allow us to conclude that it is a successful argument.

Another topic that is important in the examination of ontological arguments is the significance of ontological parodies. We noted earlier that several critics of ontological arguments have attempted to discredit ontological arguments by parodying them to their discredit. To illustrate the issues, consider the following—toy—ontological argument.

1. God is, by definition, a supremely perfect being.
2. Existence is a perfection.
3. (Therefore) God exists

A critic of this argument might think that the following argument presents a challenge to the proponent of that first argument:

1. Rod is, by definition, a supremely perfect Martian
2. Existence is a perfection.

3. (Therefore) Rod exists.

Why might this parody be a challenge to the first argument? Well, the only difference between the arguments lies in the first premise. And the first premise is a definition. If the proponent of the first argument is free to define 'God' using the expression 'a supremely perfect being', then surely the critic is free to define 'Rod' using the expression 'a supremely perfect Martian'. Given that there are no other differences between the arguments, the second argument goes through if the first argument goes through. But we all know that the second argument does not go through: there are no Martians, so, in particular, there is no Martian that is supremely perfect *qua* Martian. So there must be something wrong with *both* arguments. While the production of a successful parody does not identify the flaw in the argument that is parodied, it is clear that a successful parody can suffice to discredit an argument.

There are many hard questions that come up in connection with particular ontological arguments. For example, Gödel's ontological argument is formulated in a classical third-order quantified modal logic with lambda-abstraction. There have been vigorous philosophical debates about: (a) whether we should embrace classical logic; (b) whether we should embrace modal logic; (c) whether we should embrace quantified modal logic; (d) whether we should embrace higher-order logic; and (e) whether we should embrace lambda-abstraction. Moreover, if we do decide to embrace classical third-order quantified modal logic with lambda-abstraction, there remains the very thorny question of *which* classical third-order quantified modal logic with lambda-abstraction to embrace. (Perhaps you will be relieved to learn that, in this volume, Alex Pruss evades most of these issues by considering

stripped back versions of Gödel's argument that do not require all of the machinery that Gödel himself introduces.)

Consider Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument. That argument, as it is formulated by Anselm, takes for granted that some things exist only in the understanding, some things exist only in reality, and some things exist both in the understanding and in reality. But what is taken for granted here requires a great deal of explanation if it is also to be taken at face value. One option is to assess Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument against the background of the kinds of theories of non-existent objects developed by Meinong, Findlay, Sylvan, Parsons, Priest, Zalta, et al. (Graham Priest gives this kind of assessment of Anselm's argument in the present volume.) Another option is to recast Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument in ways that replace reference to existence in the understanding with talk about concept possession (see Peter Millican's contribution to this volume) or with talk about offices (see Graham Oddie's contribution to this volume). Yet another option is to recast Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument by reinterpreting Anselm's talk about conceivability as talk about possibility, following the lead of David Lewis and Robert Adams (see Mike Almeida's contribution to this volume).

### **3. Taxonomy**

It is not straightforward to provide an accurate characterisation of ontological arguments. When Kant introduced the term 'ontological argument' he said that ontological arguments 'abstract from all experience and argue, completely *a priori*, from mere concepts'. But it is not clear that any of the well-known arguments 'proceed completely *a priori* from mere

concepts'. Here are formulations of four of the best known ontological arguments (due ultimately, respectively, to Anselm, Descartes, Plantinga and Gödel):

1. Whatever is understood exists in the understanding. (Premise)
2. The words that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived are understood. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) That- than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived exists in the understanding. (From 1 and 2.)
4. If that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived exists only in the understanding, then that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived-and-that-exists-in-reality is greater than that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived. (Premise)
5. It is impossible for anything to be greater than that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived. (Premise)
6. (Therefore) That-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived does not exist only in the understanding. (From 4 and 5.)
7. (Therefore) That-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived exists in reality. (From 3 and 6.)

1. The idea of a supremely perfect being includes the idea of existence. (Premise)
2. The idea of a supremely perfect being is the idea of a being with a true and immutable nature. (Premise)
3. Whatever belongs to the true and immutable nature of a being may be truly affirmed of it. (Premise)
4. (Therefore) A supremely perfect being exists. (From 1, 2, and 3.)

1. A being is maximally excellent iff it is omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect.  
(Definition)
2. A being is maximally great iff it is necessarily maximally excellent and necessarily existent. (Definition)
3. It is possible that there is a maximally great being. (Premise)
4. (Therefore) There is a maximally great being. (From 1, 2, and 3.)

1. A is an essence of x iff for every property B, x has B necessarily iff A entails B.  
(Definition)
2. x necessarily exists iff every essence of x is necessarily exemplified. (Definition)
3. x is God-like iff x has essential properties those and only those properties that are positive. (Premise)
4. If a property is positive, then its negation is not positive. (Premise)
5. Any property entailed by a positive property is positive. (Premise)
6. The property of being God-like is positive. (Premise)
7. If a property is positive, then it is necessarily positive. (Premise)
8. Necessary existence is positive.
9. (Therefore) Necessarily, the property of being God-like is exemplified. (From 1-8.)

I think that it is pretty clear that not all of the premises in any of these arguments can plausibly be claimed to be true in virtue of conceptual containment; that is, I think that it is pretty clear that not all of the premises in any of these arguments can plausibly be taken to be conceptual truths. Moreover—though this is not immediately relevant to Kant's taxonomy—it is pretty clear that not all of the premises in any of these arguments can plausibly be

claimed to be analytic. Certainly, no *objectors* to these arguments are going to suppose any of these things.

Perhaps it might be said: what matters is whether those who constructed the arguments suppose that they are abstracting from all experience, and arguing completely *a priori* from mere concepts. But I think that it is no less clear that Anselm, Descartes, Plantinga and Gödel do not take themselves to be arguing completely *a priori* from mere concepts. Indeed, it is not at all clear that either Plantinga or Gödel really is mounting any kind of argument for the given conclusion. Gödel claims that his interest is just in showing that, using the materials that Leibniz took to be available to him, you can reach the conclusion that Leibniz wanted; and Plantinga claims that the argument actually establishes only the conclusion that it is rational to believe that there is a maximally great being.

Perhaps it might be said: what matters is whether those who endorse the arguments suppose that they are abstracting from all experience, and arguing completely *a priori* from mere concepts. But I think that it is pretty clear that many of those who now endorse these arguments do not suppose that they are abstracting from all experience and arguing completely *a priori* from mere concepts. In my experience, when people endorse the arguments, they simply rely upon all-things-considered judgments about the various premises; and those all-things-considered judgments are not themselves arrived at by abstracting from all experience and arguing completely *a priori* from mere concepts.

Suppose we abandon the Kantian characterisation. What should we put in its place? Perhaps we might say that what is distinctive of ontological arguments is that they have no premises whose justification relies upon perceptual experience. To bolster this suggestion, we might

observe that there is no premise in any of these arguments that might be taken for a report based upon perceptual experience.

But, if we think about the way in which people now try to justify their acceptance of premises in these arguments, it really isn't clear that reliance upon perceptual experience plays no role in that justification. Consider Plantinga's claim that it is possible that there is a maximally great being. How does Plantinga justify that claim? Certainly not by appealing to the conceivability of there being a maximally great being. For, plausibly, on any standards of conceivability, it is no less conceivable that there is no maximally great being. If all we have to go on is considerations about conceivability, then it seems that we should accept neither the claim that it is conceivable that there is a maximally great being, nor the claim that it is conceivable that there is no maximally great being. So how does Plantinga justify the claim? By appealing to what seems all-things-considered plausible to him. When he considers the matter carefully, he judges that it is possible that there is a maximally great being (and he judges that it is not possible that there is no maximally great being). Is that judgment in no way reliant upon perceptual experience? I don't suppose that Plantinga thinks so. On his own account, he believes that it is possible that there is a maximally great being because he believes that there is a maximally great being, and he believes that there is a maximally great being because he makes certain kinds of judgments when he has certain kinds of perceptual experiences (e.g. he judges 'a maximally great being made all this' when he looks at the starry heavens).

Does this mean that we should abandon any attempt to characterise ontological arguments?

No. What it does mean, I think, is that we should think about them in a very different way. I have come to think that ontological arguments are arguments with a particular *genealogy*:



what is distinctive of ontological arguments is that their formulation has the right kind of connection to Anselm's argument. The brief history that I gave above sets out the line of descent that runs from Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument through the works of Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Gödel, Lewis, Plantinga and Tichý. Of course, it is conceivable that someone produce an argument that is very similar to the arguments in the actual line of descent but that is entirely independent of them—and, in that case, we might wish to expand our characterisation of ontological arguments so that that argument is included. But, as things stand, there is no reason for us to contemplate any such expansion.

#### **4. Objections**

There are many people who have taken themselves to be in possession of a decisive general objection to ontological arguments. We have already noted that Aquinas took himself to have compelling general reason for thinking that there could be no *a priori* argument for the existence of God that is successful for us; and that Kant took himself to have compelling general reason for thinking that 'the ontological argument' is a spectacular failure. Others have given quite different general objections to ontological arguments.

Johnston (1992) claims to be able to show that, if it is accepted that it is possible that God's knowledge of the free actions of human beings is based upon those free actions, then there can be no *a priori* grounds for believing that any ontological argument is sound. Johnston assumes that we know *a priori* that, if God exists, God is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and so forth. He then notes, if we suppose that there is a sound ontological arguments, then we are committed to the following pair of claims:

- (1) It is *a priori* that, for any proposition that p, God judges that p iff it is that p
- (2) It is possible that, for some proposition that p, God judges that p because it is the case that p

But, according to Johnston, given (1) and (2), it plausibly follows—by employing a principle of substitution that is licensed by (1) to make a substitution in (2)—that:

- (3) It is possible that, for some proposition that p, God judges that p because God judges that p.

But there is no proposition that p for which it is possible that God judges that p because God judges that p: the claim that God judges that p because God judges that p is always an explanatory solecism. So (3) is false. But, if there were a sound ontological argument, then (1) would be true. So, unless we deny that it is possible that God's knowledge of the free actions of human beings is based upon those free actions, we must accept that there are no sound ontological arguments, i.e. no sound *a priori* arguments for the existence of God. While some fans of ontological arguments may respond to this argument by rejecting (2), there is another option: reject the principle of substitution on which the argument relies. (See Oppy (1995: 120-2) for details.)

Barnes (1972) claims that ontological arguments fail because of the use that they make of singular terms, e.g. the proper name 'God' and the definite descriptions 'the being than which none greater can be conceived' and 'the supremely perfect being'. In his view: arguments that make primary use of definite descriptions are question-begging because primary use of a definite description requires that there is exactly one thing that satisfies that definite

description; and arguments that make primary use of names are question-begging because primary use of names must be underwritten by primary use of definite descriptions. While the details of Barnes' analysis are open to challenge—particularly his claim that primary use of names must be underwritten by primary use of definite descriptions—and while it seems implausible to suppose that Barnes' analysis defeats any of the four arguments given in the previous section of this Introduction, there are many who have followed him in thinking that there are considerations drawn from the theory of reference that suffice to establish that, quite generally, ontological arguments are question-begging. I think that this view is implausible; it is, for example, very hard to see how any considerations drawn from a plausible theory of reference could suffice to defeat any of the four arguments given in the previous section.

Some people have thought that, while Barnes' focus on the use of singular terms is mistaken, he is nonetheless right to think that all ontological arguments are question-begging. As we have already noted, it is not altogether easy to say exactly what it is for an argument to be question-begging. But, in any case, this general objection to ontological arguments seems needlessly overstated: some of the historically well-known ontological arguments are plausibly either invalid or else possessed of not uncharitable readings on which they are invalid. For these arguments, we do not need to decide whether we can stretch an account of begging-the-question to allow them to fall within its scope. (In the present volume, Peter van Inwagen argues that all, or, at any rate, almost all, modal ontological arguments are question-begging, while other ontological arguments—e.g. Meinongian ontological arguments and Conceptual ontological arguments—are, for quite different reasons, irremediably flawed.)

There are various 'general objections' that we might now think to try. Perhaps all ontological arguments are invalid or question-begging. Perhaps all ontological arguments are invalid or

question-begging or uncontroversially unsound. Perhaps all ontological arguments are invalid or question-begging or uncontroversially unsound or possessed of a conclusion that uncontroversially has no religious significance. Etc. Whether these is much interest that attaches to these 'general objections' turns upon the details. It is one thing to argue by cases; perhaps, for example, a consideration of cases shows that, hitherto, all of the ontological arguments that have ever been formulated are invalid or question-begging or uncontroversially unsound or possessed of a conclusion that uncontroversially has no religious significance. It is quite another thing to argue in principle that it never will be, because it never could be, that there is a non-question-begging ontological argument that is both sound and possessed of a conclusion that has religious significance.

What should be the target of opponents of ontological arguments? Is it enough for opponents of ontological arguments to give detailed accounts of the failing of extant ontological arguments? Or is it incumbent upon opponents of ontological arguments to try to argue that it is impossible for there to be a successful ontological argument?

I doubt that there is any good all-things-considered reason for opponents of ontological arguments to look for successful arguments for the conclusion that it is impossible for there to be successful ontological arguments. It is obvious that, if God does not exist, then there are no successful arguments for the existence of God. It is also obvious that, if the key premise in modal ontological arguments,

(\*). Necessarily, if God exists, then, necessarily, God exists

is accepted, then, if God does not exist, it is impossible that there are successful arguments for the existence of God. If you have good all-things-considered reason to suppose that God does not exist, then you have all the reason you need to suppose that there are no successful ontological arguments. Perhaps your having good all-things-considered reason to suppose that God does not exist requires you to have—though perhaps it also supplies you with—good all-things-considered reason for thinking that no extant ontological arguments are sound; but, if, for each extant ontological argument, you have good all-things-considered reason for saying that it is not a sound argument for the existence of God, then there is nothing more—and can be nothing more—that is required of you, in connection with ontological arguments, to make it the case that you have good all-things-considered reason to believe that there is no God.

## 5. Standards

In order to think well about the assessment of ontological arguments, we need to have some general theory for the evaluation of arguments. Quite generally, what does it take for an argument to be successful? Since successful ontological arguments would be successful deductive arguments, we can make our question more specific: what does it take for a deductive argument to be successful?

Suppose that we have an argument  $P_1, \dots, P_n \text{ therefore } Q$  with premises  $P_1, \dots, P_n$  and conclusion  $Q$ . In order for  $P_1, \dots, P_n \text{ therefore } Q$  to be a successful deductive argument, one necessary condition is that  $Q$  is a logical consequence of  $P_1, \dots, P_n$ , i.e.  $P_1, \dots, P_n \vdash Q$ . If we suppose that the logical consequence relation is classical, then, given  $P_1, \dots, P_n \vdash Q$ , we also have that  $\{P_1, \dots, P_n, \sim Q\}$  is a logically inconsistent set, and we have that the negation of any

of the  $P_i$  is a logical consequence of the rest of the  $P_i$  together with the negation of  $Q$ :  $\{P_i\}/P_k, \sim Q \vdash \sim P_k$ . Given that the logical consequence relation is classical, we can establish that  $P_1, \dots, P_n$  therefore  $Q$  is valid by establishing that  $\{P_1, \dots, P_n, \sim Q\}$  is logically inconsistent, or by establishing that  $\{P_i\}/P_k, \sim Q \vdash \sim P_k$  for some  $k$ .

Suppose that  $Q$  is a philosophical contested claim, and that our interest in arguments for  $Q$  is philosophical: we are interested in whether there is good reason for philosophers to believe that  $Q$ . In particular, suppose that we are interested in whether there are successful deductive arguments for  $Q$ . What further properties should we require of our successful argument for  $Q$ , beyond the validity of that argument?

Suppose that  $A$  and  $B$  are philosophers who disagree about  $Q$ :  $A$  believes that  $Q$  and  $B$  believes that  $\sim Q$ . Suppose, further, that  $A$  and  $B$  agree about  $S_1, \dots, S_i$ , and disagree about  $T_1, \dots, T_j$ , with  $A$  believing  $T_{1A}, \dots, T_{jA}$  and  $B$  believing  $T_{1B}, \dots, T_{jB}$ , where, for each of the  $T_{iA}$  and  $T_{iB}$ ,  $T_{iA} \vdash \sim T_{iB}$  and  $T_{iB} \vdash \sim T_{iA}$ . Given that  $A$  believes that  $Q$ , what premises can there be in an argument that  $A$  presents to  $B$  that is a plausible candidate to be a successful argument for  $Q$ ?

Clearly, it is fine for  $A$  to take any of the  $S_i$  as premises. But, if  $A$  takes any of the  $T_k$  as premises, then it must be the  $T_{kB}$  that  $A$  takes as premises. For, if  $A$  takes any of the  $T_{kA}$  as premises,  $B$  can immediately reply that, because he does not believe any of the  $T_{kA}$ , the argument gives  $B$  no reason to accept  $Q$ . But, if  $A$  takes only the  $S_i$  and  $T_{kB}$  as premises, and gets  $Q$  as a logical consequence, then  $A$  has shown that  $B$ 's beliefs are logically inconsistent: the  $S_i$ ,  $T_{kB}$  and  $\sim Q$  form a logically inconsistent set. In response,  $B$  needs to set about

changing something: but, obviously, it need not be that B changes from  $\sim Q$  to  $Q$ ; B might change to one (or more) of the  $T_{kA}$ , or B might change one (or more) of the  $S_i$  to  $\sim S_i$ .

The lesson here is that, if A and B have well-developed philosophical views, and if A and B have mapped out the extent of their disagreement, then the only role left for deductive argument in the direct prosecution of their dispute is to provide *reductios*, in those cases where the views of one or the other are logically inconsistent. While it may be disappointing, this is all that we can expect from deductive arguments with perennially contested conclusions in areas where disagreement has already been thoroughly mapped.

Note that nothing substantive changes in the above discussion if we consider, instead, C, who withholds judgment about  $Q$ , and about propositions  $R_1, \dots, R_k$  that A believes, agrees with A on propositions  $S_1, \dots, S_i$ , and disagrees with A on propositions  $T_1, \dots, T_j$ . In order to give C a reason to reconsider C's beliefs, by presenting C with a deductive argument, A needs to show that there is an inconsistency in C's beliefs. If the  $S_i$  entail  $Q$ , or one or more of the  $R_i$ , or one or more of the  $T_i$ , then A can show to C that C should make some change in belief, by presenting C with a deductive argument. Otherwise, A cannot give C a good reason to make some change in belief simply by presenting C with a deductive argument, if the goodness of the reason is to flow from the goodness of the deductive argument.

It is, of course, true that, by A's lights, there are lots of other inconsistent sets of sentences that are linked to valid arguments with  $Q$  as conclusion. Moreover, there are lots of such arguments that, by A's lights, are sound. Whether these arguments are '*a priori* arguments' for  $Q$  depends upon whether the premises are knowable *a priori*. Consider, as a toy example:

1. Either  $2+2=5$ , or  $Q$
2.  $2+2\neq 5$
3. (Therefore)  $Q$ .

2 is paradigmatically knowable *a priori*; whether 1 is knowable *a priori* depends upon whether  $Q$  is knowable *a priori*. If it is, then our toy example is an *a priori* argument for  $Q$ . Wherever  $A$  thinks that a proposition  $Q$  is knowable *a priori*,  $A$  will have an endless supply of what  $A$  judges to be sound *a priori* arguments for  $Q$ . (And, if  $B$  thinks that it is knowable *a priori* that  $\sim Q$ , then  $B$  will have an endless supply of what  $B$  judges to be sound *a priori* arguments for  $\sim Q$ .) Make sure that you are not misled by the simplicity of our toy argument: anyone with a little logical facility can generate complicated many-premise arguments of this kind for which it is a major undertaking to determine whether or not they are valid. But, of course, it really does not profit those with genuine philosophical interests to be in the business of generating these kinds of arguments.

Despite the limitations on the utility of arguments, with perennially contested conclusions, in areas where disagreement has already been thoroughly mapped, for those engaged in dispute about those perennially contested claims, there are clearly other uses for derivations for those engaged in such dispute. Anyone can learn about their own present commitments by making derivations from what they believe, so long as the conclusions of those derivations are not things that they already believe. (Of course, the result of such derivation might be to revise what they already believe, rather than to continue with the commitment once they recognise that they have it: there is no guarantee in advance that this will not be the case.) Anyone can help others to learn about their present commitments, by making derivations from what they believe. And so forth.



Perhaps, though, we should not be concentrating on which derivations can do for individuals, or for the parties to particular disputes. The ontological arguments set out in §3 above are not just any old derivations; some are derivations that have been scrutinised for centuries. Is there some other purpose that these ontological arguments might be intended to serve, and that might justify the attention that has been paid to them?

One thought is that we might idealise. Suppose, for example, that an ideal—best possible—theist and an ideal—best possible—naturalist are locking horns. The theist is maximally rational, maximally reflective, maximally well-informed, and so forth, among theists; the naturalist is maximally rational, maximally reflective, maximally well-informed, and so forth, among naturalists. Is there any mileage that our ideal theist can gain by presenting one of our ontological arguments to an ideal naturalist? It is hard to see how that could be the case.

Current rational, reflective, well-informed naturalists do not think that any extant ontological arguments are sound; why would we think that things would be different for maximally rational, maximally reflective, maximally well-informed naturalists? At the very least, it seems pretty clear that thinking about this kind of idealisation is not going to help to narrow any gap in judgment of the merits of ontological arguments between current theists and current naturalists.

A different thought is that there is an alternative philosophical role that arguments can play that has nothing to do with persuasion of those who do not initially accept the conclusions of these arguments. Perhaps, for example, there is a role that arguments can play in *justifying* beliefs. Some philosophers have thought that person is only justified in believing a proposition if they are appropriately related to an argument that has that proposition as its

conclusion. If that is right, then perhaps ontological arguments can play that role for some people for the propositions that are the conclusions of those ontological arguments. But what would the mooted ‘appropriate relation’ be? Not that there *are* valid arguments with premises that are entailed by what one believes and the proposition in question as conclusion: we have already seen that this condition is satisfied for everything that you believe, no matter how well-justified or ill-justified your beliefs are. Not that you *have framed* valid arguments with premises that are entailed by what one believes and the proposition in question as conclusion: it is obvious that you have countless justified beliefs—e.g. beliefs concerning your current environment—for which you have framed no such arguments. Not that you *could frame* valid arguments with premises that are entailed by what one believes and the proposition in question as conclusion: after all, as we have already noted, it is obvious that, for any of your beliefs, no matter how well-justified or ill-justified, you could frame an argument that meets this condition.

Perhaps, instead, we should be focussing on *inferential* beliefs; perhaps there is a role for arguments to play in justifying those among your beliefs that you adopted by inferring them from other beliefs that you held at the time that you made the inference. Or perhaps we should be focussing on those among your inferential beliefs that have not subsequently received justification from sources other than inference: perhaps arguments have a role in the justification of your *purely inferential* beliefs? But suggestions along these lines seem to conflate implication and inference (and perhaps also to conflate context of discovery with context of justification). At the time that inferential beliefs are adopted, what matters, from the standpoint of justification, is simply whether you do a good enough job of updating your beliefs; whether you have constructed—or can construct—arguments that have the newly adopted beliefs as conclusions seems to be completely beside the point.

One final thought—at least for this occasion—is that we should now idealise: ideal epistemic agents who adopt purely inferential beliefs acquire (extra?) justification for those beliefs if they (can?) construct arguments, with premises all entailed by their other beliefs, that have those inferential beliefs as conclusions. But, in this case, too, the arguments are surely just fifth wheels to the justificatory coach. Consider ideal Bayesian agents who update by conditionalisation: in this case, there is nothing for arguments to do. Of course, it is a substantive claim that ideal epistemic agents are ideal Bayesian agents; nonetheless, the case seems highly suggestive.

One gap in our understanding of ontological arguments—and arguments more generally—that might be filled in the next fifty years concerns the standards of assessment that successful arguments must meet. This gap gives us much to ponder.