

Kevin J. Harrelson (2009) *The Ontological Argument from Descartes to Hegel* JHP Book Series. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 253 pp.

Harrelson's book commences with the following words:

This book provides a philosophical analysis of the several debates concerning the 'ontological argument' from the middle of the seventeenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century. My aim in writing it was twofold. First, I wished to provide a detailed and comprehensive account of the history of these debates, which I perceived to be lacking in the scholarly literature. Second, I wanted also to pursue a more philosophically interesting question concerning the apparent unassailability of ontological arguments. In pursuit of this latter problem, the driving question that my account addresses is 'why has this argument, or kind of argument, been such a constant in otherwise diverse philosophical contexts and periods?' (9)

I think that there is no doubt that Harrelson succeeds in the first of these aims. He has, indeed, produced a detailed scholarly account of the history of debates about ontological arguments from the middle of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Harrelson's history is engaging and interesting, covering a wide range of authors with diverse philosophical orientations: Descartes, Arnauld, Caterus, Gassendi, Hobbes, Mersenne, More, Geulincx, Cudworth, Locke, Clarke, Malebranche, Huet, Spinoza, Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten, Eberhard, Crusius, Kant, Mendelssohn, and Hegel, among others. It seems to me that anyone who works on the treatment of ontological arguments in this period is bound to profit from Harrelson's study.

I think that it is less clear that Harrelson succeeds in the second of his aims. Indeed, it is not clear to me that Harrelson ever really succeeds in properly clarifying the second of his aims. While this brief review is hardly the place to set out detailed considerations, perhaps I can point to just one of the difficulties that I find in Harrelson's discussion, a difficulty that arises in connection with the various ways in which he talks about 'argument', 'demonstration', and 'proof'.

Harrelson tells us, for example, that "the ontological arguments of Descartes, Hegel, et al. stand and fall with a fairly well-defined set of metaphysical, psychological and theological claims to which the arguments are wedded" (19), that "acceptance or rejection of [Spinoza's] ontological argument involves the acceptance or rejection of an entire philosophy" (135), and that "Hegel cannot demonstrate the existence of God in any sense of 'demonstrate' that involves convincing someone who initially rejects the conclusion" (220).

I wonder whether there is any acceptable sense of 'argument' that can accommodate these—and many similar—claims. There are various places where Harrelson clearly supposes that particular syllogisms are examples of ontological arguments. For instance, at p.22, he represents the argument from the *First Replies* in the following way:

Premise 1: That which we clearly understand to belong to the true and immutable nature, or essence, or form of something, can be truly asserted of that thing.

Premise 2: But once we have made a sufficiently careful investigation into what God is, we clearly and distinctly understand that (necessary) existence belongs to his true and immutable nature.

Conclusion: Hence we can now truly assert of God that he does exist.

But, if—as seems evidently correct—*this* is the kind of thing that is properly called an ‘ontological argument’, then it is hard to understand how it could be correct to say that it is the kind of thing that could ‘stand and fall with a fairly well-defined set of metaphysical, psychological and theological claims’, etc. Perhaps it is true that the *premises* of this argument stand and fall with a fairly well-defined set of metaphysical, psychological and theological claims, etc.—but the same is no less true of the following argument:

Premise: God exists.

Conclusion: God exists.

What is missing here—and what I find myself unable to supply—is some sense in which the *argumentative virtues* of things like the *First Replies* syllogism depend upon an entire philosophy, stand and fall with particular metaphysical, psychological and theological claims, and so forth. Surely, one is tempted to think, if the premises of an argument ‘stand and fall with a fairly well-defined set of metaphysical, psychological and theological claims’, then it is plainly not the case that *that* argument is ‘apparently unassailable’—certainly not if, as in the case in question, it is conceded that the metaphysical, psychological and theological claims in question are, at best, utterly contentious. When, for example, Harrelson says that:

Hegel’s case seems unique in that he openly accepts the indemonstrability of God’s existence by reducing the notion of ‘proof’ to the description of a cognitive process (221)

I think, not that he has satisfactorily explained the ‘apparent unassailability’ of ontological arguments, but rather that he is no longer talking about argument (‘proof’) in a way that I can even understand.

Of course, I agree with Harrelson that there has to be something more to say about the perennial fascination of ontological arguments. However, I think that the material in his text can be put together in ways that he fails to consider in order to at least make a start on this project. Harrelson points out—quite rightly—that there is a relatively small menu of objections that have been lodged against ontological arguments. But, I think, part of the fascination of ontological arguments is that, while each ontological argument thus far produced falls to one or another of these objections—certainly, Harrelson does not exhibit any argument that falls to none of the dozen or so objections that he distinguishes—there is no good argument that any ontological argument *must* fall to one or other of these objections (or to some hitherto undiscovered further objection). While Harrelson quite correctly observes that no

critic has identified “any conclusive and universal fallacy” in ontological arguments (18), he fails to go on to say—as I would wish to do—that it is precisely *this* fact that is the core of a satisfying explanation of the perennial fascination of ontological arguments.