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William F. Vallicella

Does God Exist Because He Ought To Exist?

Anselm of Canterbury (1033 – 1109) had a profound insight: he realized that God, understood as “that than which no greater can be conceived”, must exist of metaphysical necessity if he exists at all. To appreciate it properly we must distinguish between Anselm’s Insight and Anselm’s Argument, where the latter is the modal argument of *Proslogion* III. The Insight may be put as follows. God, by definition, is an *ens perfectissimum*, a maximally perfect being. A maximally perfect being, however, cannot be modally contingent, but must be modally noncontingent: it must be necessary (existent in every metaphysically possible world), or else impossible (existent in no metaphysically possible world). For if God were modally contingent (existent in some but not all metaphysically possible worlds), then a greater could be conceived, namely, one that exists in all worlds. I will take it for granted that a being worthy of worship, one than which no greater can be conceived, must have the modal status of necessity. God is after all a candidate for the office of Absolute, and surely no such candidate could merely happen to exist. A contingent Absolute would be no Absolute at all. The Insight, then, consists in the realization that the alternative that God faces is not contingent existence versus contingent nonexistence, but necessity versus impossibility. It is clear, however, that the Insight, by itself, is not a compelling reason to accept the existence of God. For the Insight is not that God necessarily exists, but that God either necessarily exists or is impossible. Equivalently, Anselm’s Insight is that if God is so much as possible, then God actually exists. Obviously, the truth of this conditional is consistent with God’s not being possible. The Insight is an insight into the divine modal status, not into the divine existence, and so leaves open the question whether God exists.

The Argument, building on the Insight, proceeds: It is possible that there be a maximally perfect being. (There is at least one possible world in which God exists.) Therefore, God exists in every possible world, whence it follows that he exists in the actual world. Briefly, if God is possible, then God is actual. God is possible, therefore God is actual.

The Insight is unexceptionable, or so I would maintain, but the same scarcely holds for the Argument. The main problem is to give a good reason for thinking that God is possible. The fact that one can conceive of a maximally perfect being without contradiction does not establish that such a being is possible in reality. Conceivability (thinkability without contradiction) is no sure guide to real, extramental, possibility. Given the finitude of our minds, what is conceivable to us may be impossible in reality. The following modal ontological argument, then, though

valid, and perhaps sound, is not probative unless we can supply a good reason for supposing that a maximally perfect being is really or extramentally possible, as opposed to being merely thinkable by us without apparent contradiction:

- (1) If a maximally perfect being is possible, then it is actual.
 - (2) A maximally perfect being is possible.
- Therefore
- (3) A maximally perfect being is actual.

What we need is an argument for (2). Here is one:

- (4) A maximally perfect being ought to exist.
 - (5) Whatever ought to exist, is possible.
- Therefore
- (2) A maximally perfect being is possible.

This second argument, like the first, is valid in point of logical form, and the premises are plausible. If a being is maximally perfect, then it is presumably deontically perfect and so ought to exist. To deny this is to say that a being can be both perfect in every respect but also either such that it ought not exist (which would be absurd) or such that it neither ought to exist, nor ought not exist. Either way, a greater can be conceived, namely a being that ought to exist. The other premise, (5), is also plausible. If you were to deny it you would be saying that there are things or states of affairs that both ought to exist and are impossible. Now putting the deontic subargument and the ontological subargument together we get a deontically supercharged modal ontological argument that is not only valid but appears probative:

- (4) A maximally perfect being ought to exist.
 - (5) Whatever ought to exist, is possible.
- (1) If a maximally perfect being is possible, then it is actual.
- Therefore
- (3) A maximally perfect being is actual.

So a maximally perfect being exists. Whether this is “what all men call God” (to borrow the phrase with which Aquinas ends each of his *quinque viae*) is a further question well beyond the scope of this article. Some, like Tertullian, question what Athens has to do with Jerusalem, while others, like Pascal, question whether the God of the philosophers is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Be this as it may. If nothing else, the above argument seems at least to prove the existence of a maximally perfect being. Whether this is merely a God of the philosophers cannot be discussed here. (The contemporary sources of the above argument are in Ewing

(1973), ch. 7; Findlay (1970), pp. 98 ff.; Kordig (1981), pp. 207–208; Leslie (1989), ch. 8; Mackie (1982), ch. 13.)

Premise (1) is about as solid as anything in philosophy. Premises (4) and (5), however, are somewhat less luminous to the intellect. The following two sections will say something in defense of these premises.

1 Can We Speak of ‘Oughts’ in Non-Agential Contexts?

One way of resisting the argument is by questioning the propriety of talk about non-epistemic ‘oughts’ in contexts in which agency and moral obligation are not relevant. For example, what could it mean to say that God, classically defined as a being who realizes all perfections, ought to exist? The ‘ought’ here is not to be taken epistemically: The idea is not that the existence of God is rendered certain or probable by anything we know. The ‘ought’ is to be read ontically despite the fact that God is under no moral obligation to bring himself into existence, or keep himself in existence: if God is a necessary being, then he cannot come into existence or pass out of existence. And surely no non-divine agent could be under any obligation to bring God into existence, maintain him in existence, or refrain from killing him.

So a quick way of countering the above argument is by claiming that locutions of the form ‘X ought to exist’ and ‘X ought not exist’ are meaningless apart from contexts in which the oughts-to-exist supervene on oughts-to-do. The critic will concede that there are states of affairs that ought to be. But he will insist that for each ought-to-be there is an ought-to-do that underpins it. He will insist that every state of affairs that ought to be or ought not to be necessarily involves an agent with power sufficient to either bring about or prevent the state of affairs in question. Thus it ought to be that one feeds one’s children, but this ought-to-be supervenes upon an ought-to-do.

It may not be possible to prove definitively that there are non-agential oughts, but their postulation is in line with ordinary ways of thinking and talking and there seem to be no decisive arguments against their postulation. Consider a possible world *W* in which there are no moral agents, but there are sentient beings who are in a constant state of pain from which they cannot free themselves. It seems both meaningful and reasonable to say that *W* ought not exist, that its non-existence is an axiological requirement. And this quite apart from the power of any agent to actualize or prevent such a world. One simply intuits the disvalue of such a world. One might express the intuition in the words, ‘Such a world ought not be’.

Non-agential oughts are axiologically required, while non-agential oughts-not are axiologically prohibited.

Or consider our world, the actual world, with its nature red in tooth and claw, a world in which life lives at the expense of life. It is filled with vast quantities of natural and moral evil. Assume that naturalism is true, that there is no God or afterlife, and that the evils of this world will forever go unredeemed. It may be false, but it seems meaningful to say it would be better if this world did not exist, that it ought never to have existed. The metaphysical pessimist may be wrong, but he is not talking nonsense when he exclaims, “Better some other world or even nothing at all rather than this sorry state of things!” On the other hand, there are those who are struck by the sheer existence of things and are moved to exclaim, “It is good that there is something rather than nothing!” Such optimists are not talking nonsense when they say that things are as they ought to be even in the absence of any agent or agents who are responsible for things being as they are.

The sense of these exclamations does not seem to depend on the existence of moral agents with power sufficient to bring about or prevent the mentioned states of affairs. That something rather than nothing exists could be good even if it is no one’s duty to bring it about and no one’s responsibility if it obtains. That a world of uncompensated and unalleviated misery is bad does not depend on some free agent’s moral failure.

2 Does ‘Ought’ Imply ‘Can’ in Non-Agential Contexts?

But even if there are non-agential oughts-to-be, so that we can speak meaningfully of God’s oughtness-to-be, how does this secure the real possibility of the divine existence? It is usually admitted that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ in agential contexts. Thus, if an agent ought to do *X*, then he can do *X*, where ‘can’ is interpreted in terms of ability. The idea seems correct. If I ought to feed my cat, if that is one of the things I am morally obliged to do, then it must be not only logically and nomologically possible for me to feed her, but I must also have the ability to feed her. If on a given day I am prevented from feeding her by no fault of my own, and also prevented from calling for assistance, then I cannot be held responsible for her not being fed on that day. My inability to perform an action, either in general or in some specific circumstances, absolves me of moral responsibility for failure to perform the action. Of course, qualifications would have to be added to make the preceding sentence logically ‘air-tight’. For example, if I can’t do my duty because I

have allowed myself to become a heroin addict, this self-induced inability doesn't absolve me from my duty.

The question arises whether we can extend the 'ought' implies 'can' principle to what ought to exist in non-agential contexts. I argued earlier that 'ought to exist' and 'ought not exist' are predicates that can be applied meaningfully to states of affairs whose obtaining/nonobtaining is not traceable to any agent. Thus the existence of God (classically defined as *ens perfectissimum*) is not up to God or any agent, and yet it seems to be meaningful to claim that the state of affairs of God's existence ought to exist or obtain, while the nonexistence of God ought not exist or obtain. If one insists on reserving 'ought' for the agential cases, then we could speak of the existence of God being axiologically required.

Suppose you agree that the existence of God non-agentially ought to be, or is axiologically required. Does it follow that God's existence is possible? In the agential case, possibility is interpreted as ability. If I ought to do *A*, then I can, am able, to do *A*. But abilities are the abilities of agents, and in the non-agential case there are no agents. So if God ought to exist, and "Whatever ought to exist can exist", then 'can' in this formula cannot be cashed out in terms of ability. But this is not a problem since 'can' can be read in terms of metaphysical (broadly logical) possibility. Accordingly, whatever ought to exist is metaphysically-possibly such that it exists. What we have, then, are two analogically related 'ought' implies 'can' principles.

Agential Principle: What an agent ought to do, an agent must be able to do.

Non-agential Principle: What ought to exist, must be metaphysically possible.

Both can be classified as 'ought' implies 'can' principles, but while in the agential case the 'ought' is an 'ought to do' and the 'can' signifies an agent's ability, in the non-agential case the 'ought' is an 'ought to be' and the 'can' signifies metaphysical possibility.

By my lights, both principles are true, and indeed analytically true. If you tell me that I am under a moral obligation to do *X* even in circumstances in which it impossible for me to do *X*, then I will respond that your view is incoherent and that you do not understand the relevant concepts. Similarly, if you agree that there are non-agential contexts in which some state of affairs *S* ought to exist even though *S* is impossible, then I will respond that your view is incoherent and that you do not understand the relevant concepts. There is no sense in which what cannot exist ought to exist or is axiologically required. I note in passing that Nicolai Hartmann seems to demur. "Because something is in itself a value, it does not follow that someone ought to do it; it does mean, however, that it Ought to 'Be', and unconditionally – irrespective of its actuality *or even its possibility*" (Hartmann (1932), pp.

247–248, emphasis added). To explain why Hartmann thinks that what he calls the pure or ideal ought-to-be is what it is regardless of its possibility would require a lengthy excursus into his curious modal doctrine.

3 Is the Argument Circular?

God must exist of modal necessity if he exists at all. But this Anselmian Insight leaves open the possibility that God does not exist. For the Insight is an insight into the divine modal status, not into the divine existence. The Insight reveals the divine noncontingency, which is compatible with both the existence and the nonexistence of God. To show that God exists, one must show that God is possible in reality. At this point the broadly deontic considerations lately mentioned come into play. It seems undeniable that whatever ought to exist is metaphysically (broadly logically) possible. So whether or not the argument is probative comes down to the question whether it is self-evidently true that a maximally perfect being ought to exist.

Suppose one concedes that the concept of a maximally perfect being is the concept of a being that ought to exist. This concession, however, leaves us with the question whether the concept is instantiated. It is this question that our argument cannot answer, or cannot answer compellingly. A maximally perfect being ought to exist – but only if it exists. For if it does not exist, then it is impossible and therefore (by the contrapositive of the non-agential ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ principle) not such that it ought to exist.

Thus the suspicion arises that the deontically supercharged modal ontological argument is no more able to prove the existence of God than the plain old modal ontological argument. Both arguments appear circular or question-begging. Since a maximally perfect being is possible if and only if it is actual, to know that the possibility premise of the modal ontological argument is true one must already know that the conclusion is true. But then the argument begs the question. The same goes for the composite argument under consideration in this paper. Since a maximally perfect being ought to exist if and only if it is possible, and since it is possible if and only if it is actual, it follows that a maximally perfect being ought to exist if and only if it is actual. But this is just to say that the argument begs the question.

4 The Price of Avoiding the Circle

I can imagine an objector who accuses me of failing to grasp the thrust of the argument:

You are missing the whole Neoplatonic point of the argument and your circularity objection is wide of the mark: the oughtness-to-exist of a maximally perfect being is what conjures it into existence. On Neoplatonism, “ethical needs for the existence of things are in some cases creatively effective” (Leslie (1989), p. 165). This oughtness-to-exist is independent of the existence of anything, including a maximally perfect being. God’s oughtness-to-exist is not a property of God that presupposes the existence of God. Furthermore, it itself does not exist, being *epekeina tes ousias*, “on the far side of being” (Mackie (1982), p. 231). And so the circularity objection you bring against the modal ontological argument cannot be brought against the deontically supplemented modal ontological argument. The first argument is circular because we have no reason to accept the possibility premise apart from a prior acceptance of its conclusion. But the central premise of the second argument – A maximally perfect being ought to exist – can be known to be true apart from knowledge of the truth of the conclusion.

This objection that I have concocted brings out the strength of the composite argument. It is an argument that cannot be dismissed out of hand. Being a theist, I should like it to be a compelling ‘knock-down’ proof. But I am afraid that it isn’t, even if one accepts that (i) there are objectively prescriptive values, and thus that both ethical naturalism and non-cognitivism are false; that (ii) there are non-agential values and oughts; (iii) that there is a non-agential ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ principle. The main difficulty, as I see it, is the notion that there are non-agential oughts or axiological requirements that are “creatively effective” as Leslie puts it, but do not exist. It seems reasonable to protest that what does not exist is just nothing and so cannot be creatively effective or anything else.

The price of avoiding circularity is to accept that there are creative axiological requirements that are beyond Being like Plato’s Form of the Good. Thoughts that enter this dimension taper off into mysticism and leave the discursive precincts of philosophy behind. So although the argument under examination elevates our thoughts into the region of the transdiscursive, and in so doing raises a number of fascinating issues, it cannot count as a proof in any reasonably strict sense of the term.

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