ASSESSING ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS[1]

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Abstract. Part I argues that ontological arguments, like other classical proofs of the existence of God, are parts of larger arguments in which they are embedded. These larger arguments include reasons supporting the proofs' premises and responses to them, and to the proofs' claims to validity and non-circularity, since, in the final analysis, our assessment of the proofs will express our best judgment of the cumulative force of all the considerations bearing on their overall adequacy. Part II illustrates these points by examining contemporary defences of, and attacks on, one of the ontological argument's central premises, namely, that God's existence is logically possible.

I.

George Mavrodes introduced the notion of a proof's person-relativity in his seminal *Belief in God*.[2] He began by distinguishing two sorts of "propositional concepts".[3] Subjective propositional concepts "have psychological implications or content". Examples are "believed", "doubted", and the like. Objective propositional concepts "have no

[1] The first part of this article is drawn from pp. 85-88 of chapter 5, "Theistic Proofs, Person-Relativity, and the Rationality of Religious Belief" by William Wainwright, from *Evidence and Religious Belief,* edited by Clark, Kelly James & Van Arragon, Raymond J. (2011). By permission of Oxford University Press.

[2] George I. Mavrodes, *Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion* (New York: Random House, 1970). Henceforth Mavrodes, 1970.

[3] "A propositional term is one that can reasonably fill the blank" in a sentence of the "form '*p* ... is---'", where *p* ranges over propositions. (Mavrodes, 1970, p. 36)

psychological [implications or] content". "Important examples" are the terms "'truth' and 'falsity'". Propositions incorporating subjective psychological concepts are person-relative. A proposition can be believed by me, for example, without being believed by you, or doubted by you without being doubted by me. Propositions that only incorporate objective propositional concepts are not person-relative. A proposition can't be true for me and not true for you, although you may, of course, not recognize its truth. An important consequence of these definitions is that the concept of knowledge is also person-relative. Because a necessary (though not sufficient) condition of A's knowing *p* is that A believes *p*, if the latter is person-relative, then so too is the former. (Mavrodes, 1970, pp. 36-37, 39-40)

How does this bear on the notion of proof? To answer this question, Mavrodes further distinguished between an argument's soundness, its "cogency", and its "convincingness". "An argument is cogent for a certain person N if and only if (1) it is sound and (2) N knows it to be sound." (Mavrodes, 1970, p. 32) "An argument is convincing for N if and only if (1) it is cogent for N and (2) N knows that each of its premises is true without having to infer any of them from its conclusion or from any other ... statements that he knows only by an inference from that conclusion." (Mavrodes, 1970, p. 34) Soundness isn't person-relative.[4] But cogency and convincingness are since their definitions contain subjective propositional concepts. Because we ordinarily reserve the word "proof" for cogent or convincing arguments, the concept of proof, too, is person-relative.

While something seems to me profoundly right about Mavrodes' contention, it does raise two questions.

The first is this: Philosophy has traditionally made claims on universal assent. Philosophers have believed that at least *some* arguments and *some* claims *ought* to be accepted by *all* rational or properly disposed subjects. In their view, a proof, properly so-called, is an argument which all rational or properly disposed subjects *ought* to find cogent or convincing whether they in fact do so or not. Call arguments which meet this condition "probative". We may grant that cogency and convincingness are person-relative. It is less clear that probativeness is. For the concept of probativeness incorporates an epistemic ought, and epistemic oughts,

[4] For the soundness of an argument is a function of the truth of its premises and its validity, and "truth" and "validity" aren't subjective propositional concepts.

like moral oughts and truth, aren't obviously person-relative. If I morally ought to do x, then anyone in my situation ought to do x. Similarly, if I ought to believe *p* or accept *a* (where *p* and *a* take propositions and arguments as values, respectively), then anyone in my situation ought to believe *p* or accept *a*. Note that the fact that A *ought* to believe *p* or accept *a* doesn't imply that A *does* believe *p* or accept *a*. Subjective propositional concepts like believe and accept are indeed part of the content of epistemic oughts like these in the sense that, in unpacking the oughts, we introduce hypothetical or counter factual conditionals which include them (for example, "if anyone were in my situation, she should believe p). But unlike Mavrodes' standard examples of "mixed concepts" (knowledge, proof)[5] the application of the relevant concepts ("ought to believe", "ought to accept") to a subject doesn't ascribe a psychological state to that subject, and so isn't person-relative in Mavrodes' sense.

The second and more interesting question, though, is this: What exactly *accounts* for the person-relativity of proofs? In some cases, differences of education, intelligence, or training. A trained physicist, for example, may know certain truths in physics, or be able to follow certain scientific demonstrations, which the untrained lay person doesn't (and perhaps can't) know or follow. Again, since what a person knows is partly determined by his or her temporal and spatial location, one person may know things which others do not. Thus, I may know that it is now raining on Milwaukee's east side although my cousin in Arizona does not. Or again, I may be privy to information which isn't available to others. The culprit may have confessed to me, for instance, but to no one else. Or God may have revealed something to Israel which he didn't reveal to other nations.

There are other, more interesting, sources of person-relativity, however. It is plausible to suppose that a good argument is a sound noncircular argument which accomplishes its purpose. These purposes vary, however. Theistic proofs, for example, may be used to convince nonbelievers, to strengthen the faithful, as instruments of contemplation, or as offerings to God. A good argument for one person may not be a good argument for another if the latter doesn't share the former's purposes. If an argument is designed to establish common ground, for instance, or to further the project of contemplation, or as an offering to God, it may be of little or

[5] Thus "knowledge" is a mixed concept because it includes both objective and subjective elements. "A knows p", for example, entails that p is true and that A believes p.

no interest or use to a person who doesn't share these aims – *even if the argument is sound and noncircular*.[6] Thus, while Plantinga's version of the ontological proof is, arguably, sound and noncircular, and can play a useful role in furthering one's understanding of God, it has little value if one's aim is to convince nonbelievers since the latter can (and usually do) reject one or more of its premises. Furthermore, even if one sees no flaws in an argument, one may dismiss it from one's mind, give it little or no weight in one's practical or theoretical deliberations, or treat it as at most an interesting intellectual curiosity. William James thought that we regard something as real only when we have use for it,[7] and something similar may be true here. Arguments are only taken seriously when they seem to us to have some bearing on how we should think or act or feel. Whether they appear to us to have that bearing depends importantly on our purposes. An argument may thus fail to be a good argument for someone because she doesn't have the interests and concerns needed for her to take the argument seriously.

There is an even more important source of the person-relativity of arguments, however. Not all good arguments are sound deductive or inductive arguments. For conclusions are sometimes warranted even though they aren't entailed by one's premises and can't be derived from the evidence by inductive extrapolation (by generalizing from the character of a fair sample, for example, or by inferring that an event will occur because similar events have occurred under similar conditions in the past). Cumulative case arguments or inferences to the best explanation are examples.[8] Moreover – and this is the central point of this section of my paper – sound deductive or inductive arguments themselves *are often embedded in cumulative case arguments*. Modal versions of the ontological argument and Samuel Clarke's cosmological argument are cases in point. Both arguments seem to me to be sound, for I believe that their premises are true and entail their conclusion.[9] In practice, however, these proofs are no more than *parts* of larger arguments in which they are embedded. These larger arguments include reasons supporting the

[6] For more on this point, see my "Religious Experience, Theological Argument, and the Relevance of Rhetoric", *Faith and Philosophy*, 22 (2005), 391-412.

[7] See, e.g., his *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 924.

[8] See my *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1998), pp. 178-87.

[9] More accurately, I believe that some modal arguments, and a suitably qualified version of Clarke's argument, are sound. See, *ibid*., chapter 2.

proof's premises and responses to the more telling objections to them and to the proof's claims to validity and noncircularity. For in the final analysis, our assessment of the proofs will express our best judgment of the cumulative force of *all* the considerations bearing on their overall adequacy.

One of the simplest versions of the modal ontological argument, for instance, has three premises:

(1) What is possibly necessary is necessarily necessary,
(2) If God exists, he necessarily exists, and
(3) It is logically possible that God exists.

Premise (1) is an axiom in the strongest systems of modal logic. (2) and (3) are controversial, however, and need support. For example, (2) might be supported by claiming that God is maximally perfect and that it is better or more splendid to exist and be God in all possible worlds than to exist and be God in only some of them. Again, (3) is sometimes supported by showing that attempts to derive a contradiction from the concept of God are unsuccessful, by defending the claim that the idea of God isn't artificially constructed or "cooked up" but instead natural, deeply rooted in humanity's religious consciousness, and in other ways. And of course these additional claims may themselves require further support. As a consequence, our assessment of the modal ontological argument's adequacy will ultimately depend on our sense of the comparative weights of *all* the conflicting considerations bearing on the proof's soundness and non-circularity.

Several things make universal agreement as to a proof's overall adequacy unlikely, however. In the first place, our assessment of the premises and of the reasons offered in their support may be unavoidably affected by our experiences and by what William James called our "willing" or "passional" nature – our temperament, needs, concerns, hopes, fears, passions, and deepest intuitions. Our assessment of "It is logically possible that God exists", for example, may be partly determined by our having or not having had apparent experiences of the divine, by the strength of our need for a larger meaning, or by our hunger for God or lack of it. Other things being equal, a person who has enjoyed an apparent experience of God, or who hungers after him, is more likely to find God's possibility intuitively obvious than someone who lacks these experiences or feels no need for God.

In the second, a person's assessment of the strength of the claims offered in support of the premises is often a function of his or her evaluation

of the comparative plausibility of comprehensive explanatory systems which includes those claims as parts. That God is maximally perfect and that maximal perfection involves necessary existence, and that the idea of God is a natural product of human religious consciousness, are both parts of classical western theism, for example. Disagreements over a proof's adequacy can thus ultimately involve a clash of world-views, and world-views can only be supported by cumulative case arguments.

Third, our final assessment of the comparative weight of the numerous considerations bearing upon the adequacy of the ontological proof, or any other interesting philosophical argument, is a paradigm example of informal reasoning. In assessing an inference to the best explanation, for example, we have to decide which hypotheses should be taken seriously and which dismissed as non-starters, what evidence is relevant and what isn't, the comparative weights to be placed on various kinds of evidence, and so on. We must also make judgments of prior probability. Some hypotheses and opinions are legitimately dismissed without argument but those we can't dismiss must be assigned a certain antecedent probability. Moreover, each of us approaches arguments with his "own view concerning" the likelihood of the conclusion "prior to the evidence; this view will result from the character of his mind ... If he is indisposed to believe he will explain away very strong evidence; if he is disposed" to believe he may be willing to "accept very weak evidence".[10]

Finally, and perhaps most important, each reasoner must finally make an assessment of the argument's overall force, determine how strongly the arguments "antecedents" (its premises and the considerations bearing on them) support its conclusion.

There are no mechanical decision procedures for making the assessments described in the last two paragraphs. Judgment is called for and, in the last analysis, each of us must form her own best judgment concerning these matters. Our judgments are irredeemably personal, however. For when all is said and done, each of us can only view the various pieces of evidence "in the medium of [*her*] primary mental experiences, under the aspects which they spontaneously present to [*her*], and with the aid of [*her*] best" efforts to do justice to them.[11]

[10] John Henry Newman, "Love the Safeguard of Faith against Superstition", in *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford* (Oxford 1843; reprint, Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1966), p. 226.

[11] John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London, 1870; reprint, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 318.

Assessments of interesting and existentially significant philosophical arguments invariably reflect our personal histories, then. They also reflect our passional nature. Nor is this necessarily a bad thing. As I have argued elsewhere,[12] certain dispositions of the heart may be needed to reason rightly about value laden subject matters. That certain dispositions and attitudes are needed to reason rightly about ethical matters, for example, is a commonplace in classical Chinese and western moral philosophy. Thus Plato thought that "no man who is not naturally inclined and akin to justice and all other forms of excellence, even though he be quick at learning and remembering this or that ... will ever attain the truth that is attainable about virtue".[13] And Aristotle believed that the first premises of moral reasoning are general propositions about what is good for people in general, or for certain kinds of people, or for people in certain circumstances. General propositions of this kind are partial articulations of the good life. Men and women whose natures have been warped by bad education or circumstances, however, will have a perverted sense of the good (identifying it with the life of pleasure, say, or the life of worldly honour). These people (as Plato says) have a "lie in their soul", and are therefore incapable of reasoning correctly about moral matters. A properly cultivated emotional nature is thus essential to sound ethical reasoning.

Now classical Christian theism identified God with Goodness itself. If this identification is correct, it is not surprising that the proper dispositions and feelings should also be thought necessary to reason correctly about God.

Furthermore, the relevance of my remarks is even more general than my application of them to classical ethics and Christian theism might suggest. The most obvious instances of the thesis that basic disputes reflect different passionally inflected assessments of more or less the same body of evidence is furnished by conflicts over comprehensive world-views. Some of these world-views are religious but many are not. It is at least arguable, however, that *all* of them integrally incorporate values.[14] If they do, and values can't be grasped in the absence of the right

[12] William J. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Practical Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

[13] *Plato's Epistles*, trans. with critical essays and notes by Glen R. Morrow (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), pp. 240-41.

[14] Doesn't physicalism, for example, incorporate high valuations of the hard sciences and comparatively low valuations of the cognitive worth of other intellectual exercises, assign a negligible antecedent probability to theism and other religious views, and so on?

feelings and attitudes, then appropriate dispositions of the heart will be needed to discern the truth of a world-view. Wrong dispositions, on the other hand, will result in false judgments and intellectual blindness.

Yet if this is correct, arguments are person-relative in an even deeper sense than those discussed earlier. Since an argument's cogency and convincingness can depend on the state of one's heart, and the states of people's hearts vary, an argument which is cogent or convincing for one person may not be cogent or convincing for another.

Some of these arguments may nonetheless be probative. Proofs are relative to persons *because* they differ in education, training, and intelligence, *because* they differ in their spatio-temporal location or the information available to them, or *because* they differ in purpose or the state of their hearts. Many of these differences are epistemically innocent.[15] Variations in education, training, and intelligence, or in spatio-temporal location or available information, are examples. Other differences are less obviously innocent. It is arguable, for instance, that all men and women *ought* to exhibit the dispositions and motions of the heart needed to reason rightly about ethical matters and the things of religion, or to share certain purposes. If they should, then any person-relativity derived from variations in purpose or in dispositions of the heart ought not to exist, and proofs whose cogency and convincingness depend upon having the right dispositions or sharing the right purposes *should* be cogent and convincing to everyone who can understand them. They are therefore probative in the sense defined earlier whether everyone or even most people accept them or not.

I will next illustrate these points at more length by examining the ontological argument's possibility premise.

II

Why think that "It is logically possible that God exists" is true? Philosophers have provided a variety of answers.

Clement Dore, for example, argued in this way.[16] The impossibility of a complex mathematical or logical formula may not be intuitively obvious

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And don't these valuations, assignments, etc., in turn express the physicalist's temperament, what he or she has use for, and the like?

[15] In the deontological sense.

[16] Clement Dore, *Theism* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1984), pp. 72-74.

to us. But its possibility typically isn't either. By contrast, the logical possibility of propositions such as "Unicorns exist" appears obvious on their face. "God (a maximally perfect being) exists" seems more like the latter than the former in this respect. Dore's point isn't merely that it isn't obvious that "God exists" is impossible but that it seems obvious that his existence is possible. To help us see the force of this consider the following three ways of unpacking the concept of a maximally perfect being.

Alvin Plantinga defines a maximally perfect being as (roughly) a being that can do anything that it is possible for it to do, knows all true propositions, is unsurpassibly good, and exists in all possible worlds. Charles Hartshorne, on the other hand, defines a maximally perfect being as a being that can be surpassed only by itself. (It can't be surpassed with respect to good-making properties like knowledge and power which have intrinsic maxima; and with respect to good-making properties which lack intrinsic maxima such as happiness,[17] can be surpassed only by itself.) A more traditional way of defining maximal perfection or greatness is this: A maximally perfect being =df. a being which has all and only "pure" perfections, i.e., perfections that entail no imperfections,[18] such as being, goodness, love, power, knowledge, and (arguably) self-sufficiency. All three conjunctions of attributes at least *seem*, at first glance, to be co-exemplifiable.[19]

That some states of affairs are possible on their face is analogous to James van Cleve's claims that in some cases we "just see" that certain things are possible.[20] Because "see" is a success verb, however, "*seems* to

[17] And arguably goodness.

[18] Pure perfections are thus distinguished from both imperfections and "mixed" perfections. The former encompasses both defects like blindness or unrighteousness and limitations such as our inability to lift stones over a certain weight. The latter enhance a thing's value but imply some defect or limitation. Repentance implies the presence of a moral failure that one repents, for example. And while neither being human nor being corporeal entail defects both involve limitations.

[19] Doesn't the possibility of "God does *not* exist" *also* seem possible on its face? Perhaps initially. But, for many of us at least, the intuition that God's non-existence is possible tends to vanish once we realize that the possibility of God's *non*–existence entails the impossibility of his *existence*. (Since [if the ontological argument is valid] the possibility of God's existence entails the necessity of his existence, and the possibility of God's non-existence entails the denial of the necessity of his existence, the possibility of God's non-existence entails that God's existence is impossible.)

[20] James van Cleve, "Conceivability and the Cartesian Argument for Dualism", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 64 (1983), 35-45.

see" is not only closer to what I have in mind but also, I think, a more accurate description of the modal intuitions in question.

Since our modal intuitions are defeasible, the fact (if it is a fact) that God's existence is *prima facie* possible or possible on its face does not entail that God's existence is *ultima facie* possible. But I believe that these modal intuitions do carry significant epistemic weight.

It is commonly objected that appeals to "self-evidence" or "just seeing" are woefully insufficient, however, and that modal claims must be grounded in something further.[21] Conceivability obviously isn't enough

[21] There are other objections of course. So called "experimental philosophers" have provided empirical evidence that our modal intuitions are unstable. But as Ernest Sosa notes ("Experimental Philosophy and Philosophical Intuition", *Philosophical Studies*, 132 [2007], 99-107), while disagreement can pose a problem, "*verbal* disagreement need not reveal any substantive, real disagreement, if ambiguity and context might account for the verbal divergence." (Sosa, 2007, p. 102, my emphasis.) An example may be Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichol's finding (in "Moral Responsibility and Determinism: The Cognitive Science of Folk Intuitions", *Nous*, 41 [2007], 663-85) that "when subjects are asked the abstract question whether agents in D ['a fully determinist universe'] are fully responsible 86% say they are not", but when "a dastardly deed is attributed with a wealth of detail to a particular agent in D", 72% of the same subjects say that he is". The divergence arguably reflects a slippage between two different senses of "moral responsibility", however – an "accountability" sense in which an agent S "is properly held accountable or responsible *for* A, in such a way that various good (or bad) things may be [legitimately] visited on S *for* doing A"; and an "attributability" sense in which an agent S is said to be responsible for A if A is "his own doing" and "reveals something about S's character" (Sosa, 2007, p. 104). Again, Stacy Swain, Joshua Alexander, and Jonathan M. Weinberg ("The Instability of Philosophical Intuitions: Running Hot and Cold on Truetemp", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 76 [2008], 138-155) show that our willingness to ascribe or deny knowledge in Keith Lehrer's Truetemp case is affected by how the question is framed. The case is this. Unbeknownst to Truetemp, "both a very accurate thermometer and a computational device capable of generating thoughts" has been implanted in his brain. As a result, Truetemp is reliably able to tell what temperature it is without consulting an external instrument or having any idea of why his temperature thoughts are so accurate. The question is, does Truetemp *know* that (e.g.) the temperature is 104 degrees? The authors found that if the subjects were first presented with a clear case of non-knowledge, they were more likely to ascribe knowledge to Truetemp. If they were first presented with a clear case of knowledge, they were less likely to do so. Yet as Sosa points out "the effects of priming, framing, and other such contextual factors will affect the epistemic status of [modal] intuition in general only in the same sort of way that they affect the epistemic status of perceptual observation in general" (Sosa, 2007, p. 105). They don't create a *special* problem for intuition. A more radical objection to our reliance on intuition is provided by Joshua Earlenbaugh and Bernard Molyneux ("Intuitions are Inclinations to Believe", *Philosophical Studies*, 145 [2009], 89-109). In their view, philosophical intuitions are not only *not* evidence (and hence not justificatory) since

since we can imagine, understand, entertain, or picture states of affairs such as backwards time travel that rather clearly aren't possible.[22] Peter Kung contends that sensory (visual, auditory, tactual, etc.) imagination is normally a reliable guide to possibility but purely stipulative ("let so and so be such and such") imagination is not.[23] On somewhat similar

they are not "basic evidential states" like perceivings, rememberings, and introspections; they do not even play an evidential role in argument (i.e., mimic or act like evidence) in spite of appearances to the contrary. Earlenbaugh and Molyneux's argument isn't fully convincing, however. For example, they claim that, other things being equal (e.g., people's faculties are in order, they are properly positioned to [e.g.] see or remember what they claim to see or remember), we take their seemings to see or hear, their remembrances, and their introspections at face value. We don't display "a similar willingness to infer p from the fact that [another person] S finds p intuitive" (Earlenbaugh and Molyneux, 2009, p. 98). It isn't clear that a difference of this sort actually exists, though. We distrust the intuitions of others when we suspect them of being less than ideally situated with respect to the subject matter (because of ignorance, lack of the requisite skills, or something else of the sort), give them real weight when we think that they are ideally situated with respect to the subject matter, and give them some weight when there are no compelling reasons to think that they are not properly situated with respect to it. (Cf. e.g.. Aristotle on the deference due to the person of practical wisdom in ethical matters.) Again, while the authors concede that "philosophers [seem to] treat intuitions as evidence in philosophy", they discount these appearances on the ground that they confuse explanations of their beliefs with justifications of them. Intuitions, in their view, are nothing more than inclinations to believe. I am (strongly) inclined to believe p helps explain why I do believe it but doesn't justify it. Yet this can't be the whole story (i.e., intuitions can't simply be identified with inclinations to believe although they may entail them). For, if it were, most fair minded philosophers would stop appealing to them to justify philosophical claims when confronted with the authors' analysis – and they won't.

[22] Though Paul Tidman goes too far in saying that "merely conceiving a state of affairs *is no reason whatsoever* to think that state of affairs to be possible". ("Conceivability as a Test for Possibility", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 32 [1994], 297-309, my emphasis.) Tidman's support for this claim is that (1) not only can we conceive of states of affairs that aren't metaphysically possible, (2) we can never be sure that we have grasped all the relevant entailments and therefore conceived the situation adequately, and (3) have no reason to think that how our minds work (e.g., whether we can or cannot imagine something) is correlated with the way things are. But note that considerations similar to those adduced under his third heading can be deployed to support perceptual skepticism and doubts about the reliability of our faculties in general, and that his second consideration corresponds to the perfectly general worry that in drawing conclusions in an area, I may have overlooked some decisive defeater.

[23] Peter Kung, "Imagining as a Guide to Possibility", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 81 (2010), 620-63. It is not clear that Kung has shown that (purely) stipulative imagination is worthless, however. In my opinion, modal claims can be tested against cases constructed by stipulation. Given that these cases are rather fully developed, and that no inconsistencies are apparent after careful reflection, their deployment is by no

lines, Peter Hawke argues that Peter van Inwagen is right in thinking that we have little or no reason to trust modal intuitions concerning "circumstances remote from the practical business of everyday life".[24] Our possibility intuitions are reliable when we can describe "a consistent, reasonably detailed fictional world" in which the proposition we deem possible is true, and which is sufficiently (i.e., very) similar to situations obtaining in the actual world. Modal claims grounded in this way are basic. That they "are [also] somewhat sacrosanct" should be "unsurprising considering how important they are to normal life". Basic modal assertions include such claims as "it is possible that my living room furniture be rearranged", or "it is possible that this window pane should shatter"; but not "it is possible that God exists", "it is possible that alien life exists on another planet", or "it is possible that the ice age didn't occur and dinosaurs still roam the earth". Non-basic modal claims such as the latter are justified ("safe") only if they can be recursively derived from basic modal claims.[25] It seems to me, though, that there isn't a sharp line between basic and non-basic modal claims – only differences of degree. Moreover, claims like "it is possible that God exists" and "it is (metaphysically) impossible that lying isn't prima facie wrong" aren't "distant" from "actual experience" since both[26] play a central role in important strands of human life and activity. Yet it is highly doubtful that either of them can be recursively derived from Hawke's basic modal claims.[27]

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means useless. I am assuming what I believe Kung would be unwilling to grant, though, viz., that the fact that no inconsistencies appear after careful reflection is evidence that there aren't any, that the fact that there are no inconsistencies is evidence (though not conclusive evidence) of possibility, and that the more fully a case is developed the more likely inconsistencies are to surface if there are any. (Cf. my remarks on Tidman in footnote 22.)

[24] Peter van Inwagen, *God, Mystery, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 12.

[25] P. Hawke, "Van Inwagen's Modal Skepticism", *Philosophical Studies*, 153 (2011), 351-64.

[26] Or at least propositions that entail them.

[27] Hawke's test for the truth of non-basic modal claims is that non-modal facts entail the truth of the claim said to be possible. No non-modal facts in ghost stories, for example entail that there are ghosts. So ghost stories provide no reason for thinking that ghosts are possible. (Hawke, *op. cit*., pp. 363-64.) But this requirement seems to me problematic in somewhat the same way that the verification test for meaning is problematic. Cf. "I have no clear idea of whether p is possible or not since I am unable to come up with a set of non-modal claims which entails it" and "I have no clear idea of what 'p' means since I am unable to come up with a set of empirical claims which would conclusively verify (entail) p".

Elijah Chudnoff, too, wants to ground our modal judgments in something further. His requirements are more elastic than either Kung's or Hawke's, however. In his view both perceptual and intuitive modal claims are prima facie justified by their "presentational phenomenology"; i.e., by our "seeming to be aware of items", and our seeming to perceive that, in virtue of those items, certain facts are true. (Seeming to be immediately aware of an object's redness, for example, and seeming to perceive that, in virtue of that item, the object is red.) How, though, can something of this sort be spelled out for modal intuitions? In some cases the "items" are stories (e.g., Gettier cases). In others they are imagined figures or operations in which the proposition in question (e.g., "nothing can have only one proper part") is illustrated or embodied. In yet others the "item" can be the proposition itself (e.g., 'if 2>1, then 2>1") or its form. Or (in the case of a proposition like "2>1") the relevant items may be acts of intellectual awareness of the proposition's constituents that are retained in one's memory.[28] Yet while Chudnoff's attempt to ground modal intuition in presentational phenomenology is undoubtedly interesting, it isn't fully persuasive. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how his last two examples move us beyond appeals to a proposition's "self-evidence" or "intrinsic luminosity", and are thus superior to van Cleve's or Paul Tidman's claim that, in at least some cases, we "just see" a proposition's possibility, impossibility, or necessity.[29]

Are there any independent reasons for thinking it reasonable to believe that God's existence is metaphysically possible? There are at least four.
(1) Plato and Descartes maintained that the notion of (maximal) perfection is innate and provides the (usually implicit) standard by which we determine the comparative value of other things. J. L. Mackie and others have taken issue with this, however, arguing that the concept of (absolute) perfection is constructed – either by negating the various imperfections which we encounter in experience or by extrapolating a limit from observed or imagined series of things that are so arranged that each member in the series is less imperfect than its predecessor.[30] But this isn't altogether convincing. In the first place, it isn't obvious that the concept of perfection

[28] Elijah Chudnoff, "The Nature of Intuitive Justification", *Philosophical Studies*, 153 (2011), 313-33.

[29] It isn't clear to me that Chudnoff's most recent discussion ("What Intuitions are Like", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 82 [2011], 625-654), although it provides useful clarifications, does anything to relieve these worries.

[30] J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), chapter 2.

is an essentially negative concept. The fact that it can be expressed as the negation of imperfection is irrelevant. For any concept can be expressed as the negation of its negation. (p is equivalent to not not-p. Being coloured, for example, is equivalent to not being non-coloured.[31]) In the second place, it isn't clear that we could construct the relevant sorts of series if we didn't already possess the notion of their limits, i.e., of the ideals toward which the members of these series are progressing.

If there is an antecedent presumption in favour of the coherence of our innate ideas and the idea of maximal or absolute perfection is innate, then there is a presumption in favour of that idea's coherence. Whether there is a presumption in favour of the coherence of our innate ideas may depend on whether or not there is a general presumption in favour of the reliability of our basic epistemic faculties.

(2) William James thought that we are entitled to believe a proposition whose truth can't be conclusively settled on evidential grounds when the choice between that belief and its denial is "forced", "momentous", and "live". Consider, then, the following pragmatic argument for believing that God's existence is possible: "Either God is possible or God isn't possible" confronts us with a forced option. (The alternatives are exhaustive.) The option is also momentous. If the ontological argument is valid, the first alternative commits one to theism and ultimately to the way of life that theism involves. The second alternative forecloses a way of life that countless thousands have found deeply meaningful. Finally, the option is live. I have some tendency to believe each alternative. (I have a strong tendency to believe that God's existence is possible. But I also have some tendency to believe that God doesn't exist. If the ontological argument is valid, however, God's non-existence entails his impossibility.[32] Once I recognize this, I acquire some tendency to believe that God's existence isn't possible.) Suppose, then, that the issue can't be conclusively settled on evidential grounds. My "passional nature" (James) which demands hope and meaning should lead me to believe that God's existence is possible rather than impossible.[33]

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[31] This isn't quite right. Strictly speaking, the negation of *being coloured* is *being non-coloured or being neither coloured nor non-coloured*. Thus (e.g.) in the absence of light physical objects are non-coloured. Numbers, on the other hand are neither coloured nor non-coloured.

[32] If the ontological argument is valid, then if God is possible God exists. So if he doesn't exist, his existence isn't possible.

[33] Note that an argument of this sort won't support belief in the possibility of "near gods" (necessarily existing beings with enormous powers and virtues who fall some

There are at least two objections to this argument. The first is that while the choice between the theistic and non-theistic way of life is forced (I either adopt it or I don't), the choice between believing "God's existence is possible" and believing "God's existence is not possible" is not since I can suspend judgment, choosing to believe neither. The theistic way of life involves great costs as well as great potential benefits, however. Whether one can rationally (or even coherently) pursue it while at the same time thinking it is just as likely that the theistic claims on which it rests can't possibly be true as that they might be true strikes me as doubtful. It isn't clear to me that one can, or at least do so wholeheartedly. The second objection is this: The legitimacy of pragmatic arguments of this kind is controversial and, in any case, carry no epistemic weight. The question, though, is whether they must carry epistemic weight to make opting for "It is possible that God exists" more rational than opting for its denial. The objection also assumes what James denies, namely, that our passional nature isn't truth oriented.[34]

(3) Augustine argued that God (conceived as maximally perfect) is our real good, the only thing that can truly satisfy or fulfil us. If he is, then our desire for happiness is really a desire for God. The idea of God is thus implicit in our desire for happiness. (Cf. Plato's discussion of our desire for the Good and Beautiful in the Symposium.)[35]

Considerations like these suggest that the idea of an unlimited or unsurpassable or maximally perfect reality is natural, and that to suppress it is therefore to suppress something intrinsic to (normal) human nature. There is thus a certain presumption in favour of the idea's coherence. Two conditions must be met for this argument to be successful, however. First, one must show that the concept of a maximally perfect reality really is implied in the notion of God or the Good, and that nothing less than

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arbitrary degree short of perfection), necessarily existing perfect devils, and the like. For once I realize that the possibility of these entities entails their existence, I have no tendency to believe in it, i.e., hypotheses to the effect that they are possible are no longer live for me.

[34] See my *Reason and the Heart* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), chapter 3.

[35] Does this really work? Aren't we illicitly substituting identicals in an intentional context? While the substitution is illicit in the case of some intentional states, its illegitimacy is less obvious in the case of others. That John believes in the existence of happiness doesn't entail that he believes in the existence of God. But if happiness really does consist in union with God, it is by no means clear that "John desires happiness" doesn't entail that he *really* desires God, since desiring x entails desiring what constitutes it. Our desire for happiness is at bottom a desire for what would truly make us happy, not for what we merely think would do so.

a maximally perfect reality will fully satisfy the yearnings of the human heart.[36] Second, one must show that it is unlikely that ideas and yearnings so deeply embedded in human thought and desire are incoherent.

The first condition can be met. The attitudes valorised by theists and expressed in worship arguably imply that their object is maximally perfect. The fully developed monotheistic religions, at least, require "total devotion".[37] Total devotion includes a number of attitudes – love, loyalty, and commitment but also reverence, awe, and admiration – each of which is unreserved.

Theists clearly think that an appropriate object of total devotion must be greater than other existing beings since, if it weren't, it wouldn't be ultimate. If another existing being was greater, our concern, loyalty, and commitment should be directed toward it rather than the first. If it was equally great our devotion should be divided between them. Either way our devotion to the first couldn't appropriately be total. Yet must an appropriate object of total devotion be greater than all other possible beings? Two considerations suggest that the answer is "yes".

If a more perfect being than the being to which we have given our allegiance were possible, then, if it had existed, we should have given ourselves to it rather than the first. But in that case our commitment to the first can't appropriately be totally unreserved. One's commitment to something can no more be unreserved if it depends on there not having been something more perfect than one's love for one's wife can be unreserved if it depends on one's not having met someone more beautiful, charming, and affectionate.

The second consideration is this. Even if unreserved love, loyalty, and commitment could be appropriately directed toward a being when one knew that a greater was possible, unreserved reverence, awe, and admiration could not. I don't unreservedly admire a painting or ball player if I think it would be possible for a painting or ball player to be better. No more can my admiration for a being be unreserved if I think that a better being than it could have existed.

[36] Wilfred Cantwell Smith and others have argued that humanity is naturally religious; that being fully human involves placing oneself in some kind of relation to transcendence. The secularized humanity of modern western society is, in their view, an aberration – an experiment on which the verdict is still out. Note, however, that while this, if true, implies that religious ideas and yearnings are natural, it doesn't entail that the idea of God or a maximally perfect reality and a desire or yearning for it is natural.

[37] The term is Robert Adams's.

If these considerations are sound, then the theist's belief that God is a fully appropriate object of total devotion implicitly commits her to the belief that God is maximally perfect. Since sincere theistic worship includes a belief in the appropriateness of total devotion to its object, there is a clear sense in which an identification of God and a maximally perfect being is built into it.[38]

Worship worthiness isn't the only route to the concept of maximal perfection, however. Paul Tillich believed that the essence of religious attitudes is "ultimate concern". Ultimate concern is "total". Its object is experienced as numinous or holy, distinct from all profane and ordinary realities. It is also experienced as overwhelmingly real and valuable – indeed, so real and valuable that, in comparison, all other things seem empty and worthless. As such it demands total surrender and promises total fulfilment. These attitudes seem fully appropriate only if their object is maximally great – so perfect and splendid that nothing greater is conceivable. And in fact, all major religious traditions – including the non-theistic ones – have at least implicitly construed the object of their concern in precisely that way. (See, for example, Paul Griffiths' *On Being Buddha*.[39])

Whether the second condition is met is more problematic. Many philosophers believe that it isn't. Jean Paul Sartre, for example thought that while the idea of a pour-soi-en-soi was natural, it was logically inconsistent. More troublesome perhaps is the fact that some ideas which seem natural are demonstrably incoherent. The idea of a set of all sets is an example. Is it really unlikely, then, that ideas and yearnings deeply embedded in human thought and desire are incoherent?

J. E. M. McTaggart asked, "in what way is the failure of a desire to be realized inconsistent with reality? ... Many people had a real desire that the Pretender should be victorious in 1745, but they were disappointed." And if we try to save the argument by making "a distinction between [e.g.] the desire for heaven and the desire for the restoration of the Stuarts, we can only do so on account of the greater importance [i.e., value] of the object of the former". But the goodness of an object of desire is no guarantee of its present or future reality.[40]

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[38] For a fuller development of this point see my "Two (or Maybe One and a Half) Cheers for Perfect Being Theology", *Philo*, 12 (2009), pp. 228-32.

[39] Paul Griffiths, *On Being Buddha: The Classical Doctrine of Buddhahood* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1994).

[40] John McTaggart, Ellis McTaggart, *Some Dogmas of Religion* (London: Edward Arnold, 1906), pp. 56-58.

McTaggart's objections don't clearly affect the soundness of our argument, though, and this is for two reasons. In the first place, our argument's appeal isn't primarily to the value of the desire's object but to the desire's universality and depth. The desire for "heaven" or its analogues is generic and universal. The desire for (e.g.) the restoration of the Stuarts is not. Second (and more important), the present argument doesn't move from the existence of a desire (generic or otherwise) to the existence of its object but only to that object's possibility.

Still, while we can't believe that p is impossible and believe p,[41] and we can't believe that doing A or bringing about p is impossible and intend to do A or bring p about,[42] is it clear that we can't want or desire p even though we believe that p is impossible? I doubt that we can. We can want or desire things we believe to be empirically impossible but can we want or desire things we believe to be logically or metaphysically impossible? Perhaps we can desire A and also desire B even though we recognize that the two are inconsistent. But it is by no means obvious that we can desire their conjunction. In any case, in so far as one is rational, a recognition of the impossibility of realizing a desire tends to weaken or undercut it. The existence of a desire or yearning doesn't comport well with a belief in the impossibility of its fulfilment.

Even so, isn't the most that we are entitled to infer from the existence of a desire is a *belief* in its object's possibility, not the possibility itself? Of course if the desire is a basic feature of human nature, then so too is the belief embedded in it. Yet why assign any weight to the fact the desires, yearnings, and beliefs in question are deeply engrained in human nature?

William James' answer seems to me best. It is reasonable to trust our epistemic and practical faculties in the absence of good reasons for not doing so. Our deepest intimations, feelings, and yearnings are inseparable from out epistemic and practical faculties, however. If it reasonable to follow the prompting of the second in the absence of good reasons for not doing so, it is also reasonable to follow the promptings of the first.[43]

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[41] Though of course we *can* believe p if we fail to recognize p's impossibility.

[42] Although we can intend to do A or bring p about if we don't recognize their impossibility.

[43] For more on this see my *Reason and the Heart, op. cit.* See also my "Religious Experience, Theological Argument, and Rhetoric", *Faith and Philosophy*, 22 (2005), 391-412. Paul Tidman offers a Reidian defense of modal intuitions. "The Justification of A Priori Intuitions" (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 56 [1996], 161-71) contends that they are the product of a *basic* epistemic faculty, i.e., a faculty whose reliability cannot be justified without appealing to the faculty itself. (For example, suppose that "my intuitions

(4) Nothing can be evidence for (raise the probability of) a logically impossible proposition.[44] So if the considerations adduced in the

tell me that it is possible for my hand to wave about". I can confirm this "by actually waving my hand". Or suppose they "tell us that something is necessarily the case, which experience later disproves by showing it not to be actual ...But any argument which would use this kind of data must depend on another premise stating the ... modal claims that anything which is actual is possible and anything which is impossible is not actual" [Tidman, 1996, p. 168].) Tidman thinks that it seems irrational or perverse to reject the deliverances of a basic epistemic faculty in the absence of a proof of inconsistency or some other positive reason for doing so. So "even if I could withhold my belief, why should I? Wouldn't it be positively irrational from the point of view of one who seeks to have true beliefs to withhold belief in such circumstances?" (Tidman, 1996, p. 169). Yet in the absence of some explanation of *why* our faculties are attuned to the way things are this response seems incomplete. One possible explanation is that God or evolution has equipped us to sort out truth from error. If they have, then the existence of strong and deeply rooted inclinations to believe (e.g.) basic modal or epistemic or moral claims is at least *some* indication of their truth. Convincing arguments to the effect that the desires, needs, or inclinations in question would serve an important biological or psychological purpose *even if* their objects were impossible would tend to undercut any arguments along this line from evolution, however, or, in any case, provide reason to distrust intuitions concerning the possibility of states of affairs removed from what Jonathan Edwards called the "everyday affairs and the common business of life". If, on the other hand, we have to appeal to God to justify the truth of our modal intuition that God's existence is possible, then all ontological arguments are implicitly circular. Note, however, that the fact (if it is a fact) that we need to appeal to God to *explain* how we are able to discern the truth of the propositional objects of the intuitions in question does not entail that we need to appeal to him to *justify* our claim to discernment. (Cf. we may need to appeal to God to *explain* the general reliability of our epistemic faculties. It doesn't follow that we need to appeal to him to *justify* our reliance on them. [If it did, atheists wouldn't be entitled to *believe* that (e.g.) their mathematical intuitions were reliable even if they in fact *are reliable.*])

For an argument along somewhat similar lines to that in section 3 that came to my attention after completing this essay, see Alexander Pruss, "The Ontological Argument and the Motivational Center of Lives", *Religious Studies* 46 (2010), 233-49.

[44] For a rejection of this commonly accepted view see James Franklin, "Non-deductive Logic in Mathematics", *British Journal for Philosophy of Science*, 32 (1987), 1-18. Franklin appeals to cases where (1) we know that a logical or mathematical proposition must be necessarily true or necessarily false, (2) currently lack a deductive proof of its truth or falsity, and yet (3) have non-deductive reasons for believing that the proposition is true rather than false (or vice versa). Mathematical induction provides examples. It seems to me, though, that objective probabilities should be distinguished from subjective epistemic probabilities. While a piece of non–deductive evidence, e, can't raise the *objective* probability of p if p is impossible, it *can* raise p's subjective epistemic probability if it isn't (yet) known that p is logically impossible. Nevertheless, once we *know* that p is impossible (as the result of the discovery of a strict proof, for example), we know that its objective probability is 0, and that therefore nothing can raise its probability. The *logical*

standard arguments for the existence of God provide evidence for "God (a maximally perfect being) exists", then – regardless of whether those considerations are sufficient to establish his existence – (a) it is logically possible that God exists, and (b), since one is abstracting from or bracketing the question of whether the considerations in question prove that God exists, no question is being begged.

Note that we can't mount a similar argument for the possibility of near gods, perfect devils, and the like, since we have no independent (of parodies of the ontological argument) reasons to believe that those entities exist.[45] By contrast, Samuel Clarke's version of the cosmological argument points to a necessarily existing and unlimited being; the argument from high mystical experience, the moral argument, and the argument from human yearning all point to the existence of maximal perfection or the Good, i.e. each of these arguments appeals to considerations which, whether conclusive or not, provide at least some evidence for the truth of its conclusion.[46]

Peter van Inwagen and Peter Hawke have argued that we have little or no reason to trust modal intuitions concerning matters remote from ordinary experience. Their objection is highly relevant to the claim that the proposition "It is possible that God exists" is plausible on its face.[47] It is less clearly relevant to attempts to support the possibility premise by calling attention to innate ideas, our desires and yearnings, and the existence of other "proofs". The first because it appeals to value notions which play a central role in ordinary life; the second because it appeals to desires and yearnings which are (nearly) universal features of human life and thought; and the third because it appeals to things such as our sense of contingency and mystical experience that are deeply embedded in humanity's religious life. (van Inwagen's and Hawke's objection has no clear relevance to the pragmatic argument because the immediate

relations between e and p remain the same both before and after the discovery of the strict proof but the *epistemic* relations (what counts as evidence for what) do not.

[45] We *may* have *some* reason to think that a good, powerful, but limited being exists. (See e.g., J. S. Mill's *Theism* [New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957].) But we have no evidence for the claim that a being of that kind exists *necessarily*, i.e., the "design" evidence that Mill appeals to may point to a "demiurge" but doesn't point to a near god.

[46] And hence (because the conclusion ["God exists"] entails "It is possible that God exists") some evidence for "It is possible that God exists".

[47] Though in considering their case it is important to bear in mind that the controversies over the epistemic status of our modal intuitions in general hinge on highly contestable notions of reasonableness, plausibility, and the like.

conclusion of the latter is that we ought to believe that "It is possible that God exists", not that "It is possible that God exists" is true.)

Note that this section has, in effect, provided a cumulative argument for the ontological proof's third premise ("it is logically possible that God exists"). Attempts to defend its second premise ("if God exists, he necessarily exists") and defend it from objections will also involve constructing a cumulative case for its truth.[48] Moreover, the inference of the conclusion from the ontological proof's premises, too, rests on a cumulative case argument that involves weighing and balancing all of the factors adduced in supporting the argument's premises, as well as assessing the strength of their combined bearing on its conclusion.

Because these assessments reflect our personal histories, the ontological proof is person-relative in the sense that it can be deontologically reasonable for one person to accept the proof without its necessarily being deontologically reasonable for another to do so. For example, whether we find the pragmatic argument, or the argument from desire or yearning, for the proof's third premise plausible may largely depend on whether we have[49] the needs, desires and yearnings that those two arguments appeal to. The plausibility of the fourth argument depends on whether we think that the other God-proofs have some force, where the belief that they do or don't rests on a variety of heterogeneous considerations. And a similar point can be made with respect to the first – its plausibility or lack of it largely depends on the degree of our willingness to trust everyday workings of our epistemic faculties.

[48] The argument's first premise ("what is possibly necessary is necessarily necessary"), too, would need to be supported by a cumulative case argument if the appropriateness of using modal system S5 were challenged.

[49] Or recognize that we have? Not clearly. The needs, desires, or yearnings in question may prompt us to believe in God's possibility even if we aren't consciously aware of them.