

CAN AN ANCIENT ARGUMENT OF CARNEADES ON CARDINAL VIRTUES AND DIVINE ATTRIBUTES BE USED TO DISPROVE THE EXISTENCE OF GOD?

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Abstract: An ancient argument attributed to the philosopher Carneades is presented that raises critical questions about the concept of an all-virtuous Divine being. The argument is based on the premises that virtue involves overcoming pains and dangers, and that only a being that can suffer or be destroyed is one for whom there are pains and dangers. The conclusion is that an all-virtuous Divine (perfect) being cannot exist. After presenting this argument, reconstructed from sources in Sextus Empiricus and Cicero, this paper goes on to model it as a deductively valid sequence of reasoning. The paper also discusses whether the premises are true. Questions about the possibility and value of proving and disproving the existence of God by logical reasoning are raised, as well as ethical questions about how the cardinal ethical virtues should be defined.

This essay discusses the question of whether one may coherently attribute ethical virtues—and in particular, the traditional so-called cardinal virtues of courage, wisdom, justice and temperance—to a Divine being. First, some arguments ascribed by Sextus Empiricus and Cicero to the ancient philosopher Carneades are presented and analyzed. These arguments seem to run counter to such an attribution of ethical virtues to a Divine being. From these arguments, a deductively valid chain of reasoning is constructed that is shown to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the attribution. What the Carneadean argument shows is that the assumption that a Divine being is both virtuous and perfect leads to a logical contradiction.

It is shown how the Carneadean argument is highly significant, both in philosophy of religion, where it can be shown to be importantly related to St. Anselm's ontological argument, and also in ethics, where it raises diffi-

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cult questions on how the cardinal virtues should be defined.

CARNEADES THE PHILOSOPHER

Carneades (c. 213–128 B.C.) was the head of the third Platonic Academy, or so-called New Academy, that flourished in the second century B.C. Born in Cyrene, Cyrenaica (now in Libya), Carneades, according to Hankinson, had an unparalleled reputation in the ancient world as a “master dialectician,” and is “one of the great figures in the history of philosophy.”¹ He lived to be around 85 years old, becoming blind in his old age.^{2,3} Very little is known about his life, and he left no writings.⁴ According to Diogenes Laertius, other than some letters he wrote, “everything else was compiled by his pupils; he himself left nothing in writing.”⁵ His pupil Clitomachus wrote many books—according to Diogenes Laertius, Clitomachus wrote more than four hundred treatises—but none of these survived either.⁶ Carneades’ successor Philo of Larissa, was the teacher of Cicero, and many interesting arguments attributed to Carneades are described by Cicero.⁷ What knowledge we have about the opinions and arguments of Carneades is mostly to be found in the writings of Sextus Empiricus and Cicero.

Carneades was a skeptic who attacked the views of the Stoics, and other leading “dogmatic” philosophical opinions of the ancient world. Carneades did not think we can have knowledge, but unlike prior skeptics, he was not content to advocate suspension of judgment. Instead, he proposed a criterion for rational acceptance based on what appears to be true. This criterion was his famous theory of “probability” (*to pithanon*), perhaps better translated as “plausibility.” According to Long, this term, translated into Latin by Cicero as *probabile*, literally means “persuasive” or “trustworthy.”⁸ At any rate, the term “probability” is not used here in the modern statistical sense, but as more akin to what we might call “plausibility” or “appearing to be true.” Cicero describes it as “the sense impression which the wise man will use if nothing arises which is contrary to that probability.”⁹ In modern terms, it would be called plausible reasoning.¹⁰ Carneades would not have seen his arguments as settling an issue conclusively, but as raising doubts that shift a burden of proof dialectically.

SKEPTICAL ARGUMENTS ABOUT VIRTUES AND DIVINE BEINGS

Many interesting skeptical arguments about views of God (or the gods) advocated by other ancient philosophers are attributed to Carneades. There are quite a range of them covered in Sextus¹¹ and in Cicero.¹² In Sextus¹³ we find the following argument.

Premise 1: If the Divine exists, it is all-virtuous.

Premise 2: If the Divine is all-virtuous, it possesses the virtue of courage.

Premise 3: A being cannot be courageous unless there are things that are hard for it to endure.

Premise 4: If there are some things that are hard for a being to endure,

there are some things that cause it vexation.

It is not hard to see where this argument is going. It implies that the Divine being has to be less than perfect, which appears to go against the kind of theological view that Carneades is questioning. The argument carries on as follows:

And if there are some things which are hard for God to abstain from and hard to endure, there are some things which are able to change him for the worse and to cause him vexation. But if so, God is receptive of vexation and of change for the worse, and hence of decay also. So if God exists, he is perishable ; but the second is not true ; therefore the first is not true.¹⁴

The argument even appears to imply a kind of contradiction in the given notion of the all-virtuous God.

The general thrust of Carneades' line of argument has been summarized by Hallie, in a form that articulates the contradiction inherent in the notion of an all-virtuous God :

[God] is supposed to be virtuous and perfect, but virtue involves overcoming pains and dangers, and only for a being who can suffer or be destroyed are there pains and dangers. Neither suffering nor destructibility is consistent with perfection, so God cannot be both virtuous and perfect.¹⁵

This diagnosis of the fault in the set of theological assumptions that leads to the contradictory outcome pointed out by Carneades' argument is the ascription of virtue, a human quality, to a Divine being who is supposed to be perfect. Zeller articulated the crux of the problem posed by Carneades' argument: since every virtue presupposes an imperfection, ascribing a virtue like courage to God is problematic.¹⁶

This interesting argument raises not only theological questions about the nature of a perfect Divine being, but also a number of questions of an ethical nature, on how the concept of a virtue should be defined. How should courage be defined? Does courage require an overcoming of things that are hard to endure? Or should courage be defined as the overcoming of fear? Does courage imply a kind of imperfection or lack of complete power in an agent who may properly be said to be courageous? It poses some issues that are, even in light of contemporary ethical theory, difficult to deal with. The dialectical power of the argument reveals the stature of Carneades as a skeptical philosopher.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A DISPROOF OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Carneades' skeptical argument is not only very powerful as a device for raising doubts or questions. It can be extended to generate a proof for the non-existence of God, constructed below. This disproof does more than raise questions about the hypothesis that the Divine being is all-virtuous. It can be deployed as a positive argument supporting the conclusion that an all-virtuous Divine being does not exist. This positive argument is not actually expressed by the sources that report Carneades' arguments. But it can be

constructed from them, providing an extension of them that reveals the dialectical power that these arguments have in ethics and theology.

1. God is (by definition) a being than which no greater being can be thought.
2. Greatness includes greatness of virtue.
3. Therefore, God is a being than which no being could be more virtuous.
4. But virtue involves overcoming pains and danger.
5. Indeed, a being can only be properly said to be virtuous if it can suffer pain or be destroyed.
6. A God that can suffer pain or is destructible is not one than which no greater being can be thought.
7. For you can think of a greater being, i.e. one that is non-suffering and indestructible.
8. Therefore, God does not exist.

This argument has an Anselmian spin on it, because it flows from the definition laid down in the first premise, which expresses a notion of perfection after the manner of Anselm's ontological argument. But then the argument goes on to exploit Carneades' notion of the incompatibility of virtue and perfection, using this notion to prove the non-existence of a God who is said to be virtuous in the sense expressed in the fourth premise.

Anselm's ontological argument can be expressed as a chain of logical reasoning that is deductively valid. Once this has been done, the question of how to evaluate it centers on the individual premises, on whether they are plausible, on the definitions of the terms used in them, and on other informal matters, like whether the argument might be circular, or might commit other fallacies.¹⁷ The casting of the argument in a deductively valid form does not prove that the conclusion is true, or has been proved to be true. It merely has a dialectical function of shifting the burden of proof onto anyone who does not accept the conclusion to cite which premise is not acceptable, or contains dialectical problems. So too with the Carneadean argument above. The fact that it can be expressed in a deductively valid chain of reasoning has a dialectical function of leading to discussion. But before examining the premises, the question of the validity of the argument needs to be discussed.

It is not hard to prove that the argument is valid, but some of the inferences in the sequence could be criticized. Some might say that the argument sloppily moves from "a being than which no greater can be thought" at Premise 1 to simple "greatness" itself in Premise 2. Is this a problem? To investigate, the following symbolization of Premises 1 and 2 is given below, along with the conclusion 3 that follows from them in classical deductive logic. Here g is used as a name for God (the Divine being), and the expression $x > y$ is taken to stand for the predicate "x is greater than y." The expression $x >_v y$ is taken to stand for the predicate "x is greater than y with respect to virtue."

Premise 1: $(\forall x)[(x=g) \supset \neg(\exists y)(y>g)]$

Premise 2: $(\forall x)(\forall y)[(x>g) \supset (x>_y)]$

Conclusion: $(\forall x)[(x=g) \supset \neg(\exists y)(y>_g)]$

This argument is easily shown to be deductively valid in classical first-order logic. Using comparable symbolizations, the remaining premises can be adjoined to the three propositions above in a sequence of reasoning that is deductively valid, and has proposition 8 as its ultimate conclusion.

The validity of the Carneadean argument makes it function as a dialectical counterpart to Anselm's ontological argument, the argument that a being greater than which none can be thought must exist, since its failure to exist would mean that it would be less than perfect. That is, there would be the possibility of a greater being, one that actually exists. This *reductio* argument is valid, but it is open to the Carneadean objection that the idea of such a Divine being is problematic, since if its perfection is taken to include its being all-virtuous, it must be capable of suffering pain, vexation, etc. Generally, theology wants or needs to see perfection as including all-virtuousness, because an omnipotent Divine being that was not virtuous, or whose virtue we could not be assured of, is a somewhat frightening prospect. Presumably, those who advocate the ontological argument want to view Divine perfection as including an ethical aspect—that is, seeing the Divine being as all-virtuous—and therefore the Anselmian ontological argument is open to the Carneadean argument, which attaches to it as a kind of extension or corollary that destroys it.

Two aspects of the Carneadean argument make it dialectically powerful—its deductive validity, and the plausibility of its premises. As noted above, the first two premises are assumptions that fit in with or are required by the theological assumptions in the Anselmian ontological argument. And they do seem to be assumptions that are important, even vital for theology. But what about the other premises? Premises 4 and 5 are about virtue. Premise 4 claims that virtue involves overcoming pain and danger. This claim plausibly seems true of some of the main virtues, and especially the virtue of courage. Premise 5 extends this claim to say that a being can only be properly said to be virtuous if it can suffer pain or be destroyed. This claim seems plausible enough, but depends on how a virtue like courage should be defined, raising the kinds of ethical questions cited above, at the end of section 2.

DEFINING THE CARDINAL VIRTUES

How the Carneadean argument should be evaluated with respect to the acceptability of premises 4 and 5 depends on how the virtues should be specified and defined in ethical theory. The cardinal virtues are the four principal virtues—wisdom, temperance, courage and justice—upon which the other moral virtues turn, or are hinged (from *cardo*, or hinge).¹⁸ The origin of the fourfold system is Socratic, but an influential account of two of

the four cardinal virtues was given by Cicero, in the *De Inventione*. Courage is “the quality by which one undertakes dangerous tasks and endures hardships.”¹⁹ Temperance is “a firm and well-considered control exercised by the reason over lust and other improper impulses of the mind.”²⁰ The virtue of wisdom is most often associated with Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which involves judging how to act prudently in a variable situation where no exact form of calculation is applicable. Finally, justice has to do with judging claims and allegations in a way that is equitable or fair to all parties involved. And according to Jonsen and Toulmin, justice involves human perceptiveness and discernment in the application of moral and legal rules.²¹ All four cardinal virtues are distinctively human, in that all of them require balance in an uncertain and difficult situation, where hardships and dangers—either physical dangers, or the danger of making a bad decision under pressure—need to be overcome, or at least dealt with.

So how should the part of the Carneadean argument that depends on claims about the virtues be evaluated? The argument is deductively valid (or, as shown above, can be expressed in a deductively valid form), so the best point of dialectical examination is to question what appears to be the weakest premise. This weakest point for questioning would seem to be premise 4. Is it true of all the cardinal virtues that they involve overcoming pains and danger?

Clearly the virtue that most perfectly fits premise 4 is courage, which makes no sense other than as a virtue of overcoming pains and danger for a good purpose.²² The virtue of temperance also fits premise 4 quite well—certainly as defined by Cicero it does. But what about wisdom and justice? Do they make premise 4 come out true? Perhaps all that needs to be said here is that even if they don’t, on all theories of ethics, on the best accounts, they do involve elements of balance and striving for a prudent line of action in an uncertain situation.²³ And these human aspects may be enough to make questionable their compatibility with a perfect and omniscient thinker in the role of the decision-maker. Even these human aspects of wisdom and justice as cardinal virtues lend some support to the Carneadean argument.

On balance, however, support for the Carneadean argument against the existence of God is mixed. The cardinal virtue of courage gives the argument its strongest support, while the support given by the other three cardinal virtues is questionable. Even this mixed outcome, nevertheless, gives enough support to the argument to raise questions about the logical consistency of the concept of a God who is both virtuous and perfect.

One way out is to deny that courage is a cardinal virtue. But this avenue is not a line of argument that will be pursued here. Nor does it seem plausible, in line with Cicero’s account of the virtues, and the traditions flowing from that account. Cicero’s precise definitions of the cardinal virtues given in the *De Inventione*²⁴ were so succinctly stated that they became classics for subsequent writers on morality, right up until modern times. These traditions are right to accord courage a place of importance as a fundamental

virtue, and no account of the cardinal virtues could be compelling without according courage a place of prominence. A virtuous being must be a courageous being. And if so, the Carneadean argument is not only valid, but has premises that are all strongly representative of a theological position that not only had adherents in the time of Carneades, but has since become the official theological view.

The next point to be taken up is how the virtue of courage should be defined. There are two different ways of attempting to define "courage."²⁵ One way is to say that courage is the overcoming of fear, so that in order for someone to be acting in a truly courageous way, this person has to have fear in the given situation, and has to overcome that fear. The other way is to say that courage is doing the right thing in a situation where it is markedly dangerous or difficult to do that thing. Sometimes fear is such an obstacle. However, on the second conception, but not on the first, it is possible for the courageous person not to exhibit fear.

This point of issue is significant with respect to the Carneadean argument, as can be seen when the following addition to it is noted.

Further, in addition to the foregoing arguments, if God is all-virtuous he possesses courage; and if he possesses courage he possesses "knowledge of things fearful and not fearful and of things intermediate"; and if so, there is something which is fearful to God.

This extended Carneadean argument is based on the assumption that courage is defined in the first way, as requiring fear, or the awareness or knowledge of fear. But if "courage" is defined in the other way, as not requiring fear, this extension of the argument is not applicable.

WHAT DOES THE CARNEADEAN ARGUMENT SHOW?

It is worth noting that the Anselmian ontological argument expresses its main premise in a negative format. It does not say that the Divine being is perfect, but that the Divine being is that than which nothing greater can be thought. This careful way of expressing the main premise accommodates the assumption that the Divine nature may be, in some respects, beyond our comprehension as persons. Aquinas is similarly circumspect when he writes in the *Summa Theologica* that virtue cannot be predicated of God in the same way we would ascribe virtue to a person:

Reply Obj. 1: Virtue and wisdom are not predicated of God and of us univocally. Hence it does not follow that there are accidents in God as there are in us.²⁷

This reply indicates the awareness of Aquinas of the assumption that if we are to attribute virtue to God, it must be in a special sense. It would appear then that western theology has been well aware of the limitations required by the kind of objection that can be posed through the Carneadean type of argument.

Still, the posing of the Carneadean argument in a chain of reasoning

that has a deductively valid form, with premises that are initially plausible, is a worthwhile dialectical exercise which points the way to the necessity for the making of some distinctions by theologians. What is particularly attractive is the matching of the Carneadean argument to the ontological argument, as an opposed and equally compelling counterargument. What needs to be shown is how the Anselmian ontological argument can be accepted without leading to the Carneadean argument.

What is shown is that if the Divine being is to be conceptualized as that than which nothing greater can be thought, the relation "greater than" does not necessarily imply "greater than with respect to virtue" in exactly the same sense of the term "virtue" that applies to human agents. The Carneadean argument shows that it is meaningful to attribute virtue to God only in a special sense, a sense that does not imply the difficulties revealed by the Carneadean argument. It follows that when we speak of the Divine being, as courageous, prudent, loving, just, and so forth, we can do so only in a sense that is analogical to the meanings these terms normally have in ethics, when we are speaking of human agents, who typically have to act under uncertainty, depend on luck, and overcome obstacles and difficulties, even obstacles posed by their own personal failings and inadequacies.

What is shown is that there appear to be epistemological limits about what can be known by human thinkers on the basis of logical reasoning about the nature of the Divine being. These limits are staked out by the Carneadean argument. But the argument should also be seen as showing something about the dialectical development of the disputation between the believers and the doubters. It shifts a burden of proof. If theology is to defend the conception of the Divine being as that than which nothing greater can be thought, some further account needs to be given of the sense in which such a being can be virtuous.

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