Reply to Langtry

Bruce Langtry (1999) argues against the general objection to ontological arguments presented in my book <u>Ontological Arguments and Belief in God</u>. I am no longer sure that that general objection is correctly expressed in my book—and, indeed, I am no longer confident that there is such a general objection to be given—but I also do not think that Langtry's criticisms of that objection are quite right. What I propose to do here is the following: first, to briefly rehearse the general objection to ontological arguments given in my book; second, to briefly recapitulate Langtry's criticisms of this general objection; third, to explain why I think that Langtry's criticisms are ineffective; and fourth to air some doubts of my own about the argument which I originally defended.

1: The General Objection Rehearsed

Consider a putative ontological argument $P_1, \ldots, P_n \therefore C$. The conclusion of this argument contains some vocabulary whose use—in the way in which it is used in the conclusion of the argument—brings with it ontological commitment to God. Perhaps, for example, the name 'God' has an ontologically committing occurrence—as in the sentence 'God exists'. Or, perhaps, the definite description 'the greatest conceivable being' has an ontologically committing occurrence—as in the sentence 'The greatest conceivable being exists'. Or, perhaps, the indefinite description 'a being than which none greater can be conceived' has an ontologically committing occurrence—as in the sentence 'A being than which none greater can be conceived exists'. Or, perhaps, there is a quantifier expression whose domain is required to include God in its range—as in the sentence 'There is an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent sole creator of the universe'. And so forth: there are many different kinds of expressions which can be used to incur ontological commitment; some such expression must be used in an ontologically committing way in the conclusion of our argument.

But now consider the premises of the argument. Clearly, the conjunction of the premises must incur an ontological commitment to God (or else the argument will not even be valid). Yet, if the premises involve expressions—names, definite descriptions, quantified noun phrases, and the like—who use incurs an ontological commitment to God, then it seems that opponents of the argument will be able to object to the argument on the grounds that it begs the question. Suppose, for example, that the argument goes like this: 'God is the creator of the universe. Therefore God exists'. An even moderately alert opponent of the argument will point out that, on any construal on which this is a valid argument, the first premise clearly presupposes what the argument sets out to prove.

Perhaps one might think to reply to this argument that it could be the case that there are occurrences of expressions inside the scope of protective operators which prevent the incurring of the ontological commitments of the kind in question, but without harming the validity of the argument. Suppose, for example, that we amend the argument which we gave previously, so that it reads: 'According to my definition, God is the creator of the universe. Therefore God exists'. Unfortunately, in this case, it is clear that the

inclusion of the protective operator—while it does, indeed, undo the problematic ontological commitment—undermines the validity of the argument. And this point seems to be perfectly general: no matter what protective operators are used, if they really are able to cancel the problematic ontological commitments, then it will no longer be the case that the argument is valid.

So the proponent of any given ontological argument is faced with a dilemma: how can they hope to formulate the argument in a way which is valid but not question-begging. Use any vocabulary which brings with it an ontological commitment to God in the premises, and the argument is question-begging; clothe ontologically committing uses of this kind of vocabulary with protective operators, and the argument ceases to be valid.

2: Langtry's Response to the General Objection

Langtry claims that there is a strategy which is open to proponents of ontological arguments, but which the general objection fails to recognise. Suppose, for example, that the following is a non-redundant premise in an ontological argument: 'It is impossible that anything prevent the existence of God'. If we were to replace this premise with the claim that 'According to such-and-such definition, it is impossible that anything prevent the existence of God', then the validity of the argument will be disrupted: all that we will be able to conclude is that, according to the given definition, God exists. But, says Langtry, this is not the only option open to the proponent of the argument: why not instead replace the premise with the claim that 'If God exists, then it is impossible that anything prevent the existence of God'? (Strictly, Langtry suggests replacement with the claim 'If the description 'God' is satisfied by an existing individual, then it is impossible that anything prevent the existence of God'. However, the semantic ascent here is either inadequate or unnecessary: either God's existence is just a matter of the name 'God' being satisfied by an existing individual—in which case we might as well stick with the shorter conditional—or else there could be something other than God which satisfies the name (just as there can be, and are, many people in South America who are called 'Jesus')—in which case only the shorter conditional gives the claim which is required.) Isn't this an alternative suggestion which evades the twin forks of the general objection?

3: Discussion of Langtry's Response to the General Objection

Well, no. 'If God exists, then …' is just another kind of protective operator which can be used to disown ontological commitment—or, at any rate, so the most plausible reading of this suggestion would conclude. And, as Langtry himself concedes, it would have just he same kind of disastrous consequence: all that we will be able to conclude, given the new premise, is that if God exists, then God exists—and that it is hardly the startling result which we set out to prove. Langtry seems to suppose—on the basis of the discussion of particular kinds of ontological arguments in earlier chapters of the book—that the general objections supposes that protective operators are bound to be of the 'according to such-and-such theory …' kind. And, from the standpoint of that supposition, his objection makes good sense. But a careful reading of pp.115 shows that operators of the 'according to such-and-such theory …' kind are merely examples drawn from a much wider

category of intensional operators. Given that conditionals of the form 'If God exists, then …' incur no ontological commitment to God, then the use of these conditionals fits the general characterisation of 'intensional operators', as that characterisation is intended in the general objection.

Perhaps it might be replied that the above suggestion relies upon a rather implausible conception of conditionals. Suppose, for example, that we treat claims of the form 'If God exists, then …' as material conditionals, i.e. as equivalent to disjunctions of the form 'Either God does not exist, or …'. Since claims of this form can be true if there is no God, we don't want to say that they involve an ontological commitment to God. But, on the other hand, it is hard to see what contribution a claim of this form could make to an argument <u>for</u> the existence of God in which there are no other uses of the name 'God' which are ontologically committing. As we noted before, the conjunction of the premises in the argument must incur an ontological commitment to God if the argument is to be valid; since this premise does not incur such a commitment, there are only two options: either there are some other premises which alone or together incur the commitment—in which case we can simply forget about the conditional premise and focus on those other premises—or there are some other premises which do not alone incur the commitment but which, in conjunction with the conditional premise, do incur the commitment. But how could premises which together incur no ontological commitment to God—which do not entail that God exists—be made to incur that commitment by the additional conjunction of a premise of the form 'Either God does not exist or …'? If $\{P_1, …, P_n\}$ does not entail G, then nor does $\{P_1, …, P_n, {\sim}G{\vee}D\}$.

In his discussion, Langtry writes: "Suppose that [the claim that if God exists, then it is impossible that anything prevent the existence of God] follows from some metaphysical theory T, and is acceptable only to people who hold T. People advancing the ... argument hope that some atheists and agnostics hold T. There is no general reason why atheists and agnostics should not hold T, since the content of [the claim that if God exists, then it is impossible that anything prevent the existence of God] does not commit one to the existence of God. If the agnostics and atheists also hold [some other claim], and are brought to agree that [these two claims] jointly entail that God exists, then the … argument will be dialectically effective. The atheists and agnostics will not be able to avoid theism by saying that their agreement to [these claims] committed them only to the conclusion 'According to T, God exists'". (149) But, on the one hand, as we have just seen, if the two claims jointly entail that God exists, then so does the other claim alone— and it is hard to see what reason there is for supposing that reasonable atheists and agnostics will be committed to any such claim. On the other hand, if the two claims do not in fact entail that God exists—even though some atheists and agnostics mistakenly think that it does—then it is simply not the case that what we have here is a 'dialectically effective argument' (in the sense in which this expression is used in my book). So, in fact, there is no problem of the kind which Langtry finds for the general objection to ontological arguments which I proposed.

4: Other Worries About the General Objection

Even if you agree with me that Langtry's response to the general objection to ontological arguments is unsuccessful, you may still be inclined to object that the general objection proves too much. I shall consider four separate lines of thought, each of which is intended to establish a conclusion of this kind.

1. First, it might be thought that the general objection could be run against any deductive argument, no matter what conclusion it has. If the conclusion of the argument $P_1, \ldots, P_n \therefore C$ is controversial, then objectors to the argument will either claim that the argument is invalid, or that one of the premises is unacceptable—or that the conclusion of the argument should actually be understood in such a way that it turns out to be benign and acceptable to all—and yet this is just the burden of the general objection. Surely we don't want to say that there is a general objection to the use of deductive arguments in controversial areas of philosophy!

2. Second, it might be thought that the general objection could be run against any deductive argument which has an existential conclusion. If the existence claim which is the conclusion of the argument $P_1, \ldots, P_n \therefore C$ is controversial, then objectors to the argument will either claim that the argument is invalid, or that one of the premises is unacceptable—or that the conclusion of the argument should actually be understood in such a way that it turns out to be benign and acceptable to all—and yet this is the burden of the general objection. Surely we don't want to say that there is a general objection to the use of deductive arguments for existential conclusions in areas of philosophy in which there is disagreement about ontology!

3. Third, it might be thought that there are straightforward cases of arguments which show that the general objection is mistaken even in the case of classical propositional logic. Consider, for example, the following argument: "Either it is raining, or God exists. Either it is not raining, or God exists. Hence, God exists." In this argument, neither of the occurrences of the name 'God' in the premises is ontologically committing: in each case, the premise could be true in circumstances in which God does not exist. Nonetheless, it seems clear that no one should think that an argument which fits this pattern is any good; if the general objection does not work in this case, then it seems clear that it fails as a general objection to ontological arguments.

4. Fourth, it might be thought that there are clearly kinds of arguments which avoid the strategy of the general objection, even if that strategy escapes the first three objections which I have considered. Suppose, for example, that one were to argue in the following way: 'According to such-and-such a story, God exists. What the story says is true. Therefore God exists'. More formally, we might represent this argument in the following way: 'According to such-and-such a story, God exists. For any proposition that p, if according to the story it is the case that p, then it is the case that p. Therefore God exists'. Of course, no-one is likely to think that an argument which fits this pattern is any good— but the question is whether the general objection provides a good reason for rejecting arguments of this kind. Plausibly, the answer is 'No!'. In this argument, there doesn't seem to be any particular bit of referential apparatus in the premises which incurs the commitment to God: in the first premise, the occurrence of 'God' lies within the scope of

protective operators; and, in the second premise, the only obvious commitment is to the propositions which lie in the domain of the propositional quantifier.

I think that some of these objections can be met. The strategy of the general objection is to focus on the referential apparatus which is used in the premises of ontological arguments. Deductive arguments can be used in cases in which there is no disagreement about ontology—i.e. no disagreement about what kinds of things there are, what kinds of properties are instantiated, and so forth. In those cases, the general objection gives no reason at all to be suspicious of those uses of deductive arguments: it's only in cases where there is dispute about ontology that the considerations of the general objection are supposed to get a grip (cf. 118n7). So the first of the above objections fails: there is no general objection to the use of deductive arguments in philosophy which can be generated from the kinds of considerations which are appealed to in the formulation of the general objection to ontological arguments.

The suggestion that the general objection might extend to other areas in which there is ontological dispute seems to me to be not obviously unacceptable. Remember that the objection is only supposed to work in the case of ontological arguments, i.e. in the case of arguments all of whose premises are—reasonably alleged to be?—knowable *a priori*. Where there is sufficient disagreement about ontology, it seems not implausible to suppose that this disagreement will not be capable of settlement on purely *a priori* grounds. Suppose, for example, that I am a fictionalist about numbers. It would be absurd to think that I ought to be persuaded to give up my fictionalism by the observation that there are prime numbers between 10 and 20—and for just the reason which is suggested by the general objection in the case of ontological arguments: all that a fictionalist will accept is that, according to the mathematical fiction, there are prime numbers between 10 and 20. However, even if the above suggestion is not implausible, it is not clear to me that it is correct. In particular, I suspect that the mereological ontological argument described in Oppy (1997) does not fall to the general objection; and, if that's right, then the general objection does not succeed in ruling out all *a priori* arguments for ontological conclusions.

The claim that arguments with disjunctive premises can make problems for the general objection seems to me to be reasonably easy to meet, provided that one is prepared to adopt fairly liberal standards for the identification of arguments. Suppose that one were given the following argument: 'God exists; Either it is raining or it is not raining; Therefore, God exists'. Clearly, the general objection will apply in this case: the word 'God' appears with an ontologically committing use in the first premise. But this argument is a fairly trivial reformulation of the argument which was supposed to be making trouble. So the suggestion would be to allow for 'trivial reformulation' of arguments in considering the question whether the general objection applies to a given argument. Of course, that leaves the question of what exactly should be allowed to count as 'trivial reformulation': given that the premises entail that God exists, it will always be possible to 'reformulate' the premises so that this claim is numbered among them. Perhaps there is some way of taking this idea further; however, since I have already

indicated that I don't think that the general objection works, I do not propose to try to do this.

The final worry seems to me to be impossible to surmount. Even if there were no other worries which confronted the general objection, it now seems to me that there are going to be forms of arguments which escape worries about the use of 'referential apparatus' of the kinds which were originally considered. Perhaps it might be said that there can be no plausible *a priori* arguments of the type in question; but it seems to me to be clearly an open question whether there are other forms of argument which escape the worries which take centre stage in the general objection, and yet which can have as their conclusion the claim that God exists. Moreover, as I noted above, it seems plausible to think that my mereological ontological argument is a case in point (though it is clearly a contentious matter whether one should think that the proper conclusion of the argument is that God exists).

Having said all this, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the statement of the general argument in Oppy (1995) is heavily qualified. It was something of an afterthought—an attempt to generalise a pattern which seemed to emerge from the particular criticisms of the different kinds of arguments which I had characterised and investigated—and I did not intend to rest much weight upon it. That I now have even more reasons to be suspicious of it seems to me not to undermine the value of the rest of the material in the book. What seems right to me is this: that no ontological argument which has been thus far produced evades a three-pronged criticism: either it has plainly question-begging premises; or it is invalid; or it establishes the existence of something uncontroversial (which can reasonably be taken to have no religious significance, e.g. the physical universe). But much the same thing seems to me to be true about other deductive arguments for the existence of God, e.g. cosmological arguments and teleological arguments: either they are invalid; or they have plainly question-begging premises; or they establish the existence of something which can reasonably be taken to have no religious significance. Perhaps there is a question about the extent to which the premises in the other arguments are merely false and not also plainly question-begging; but, given the kind of account of begging the question which I favoured in the book, it is not clear to me that I could take this line.

In sum: even if the general objection is right, it is not well-motivated by the observations which led me to formulate it. More importantly, I no longer think that the general objection is right: there is no way I can see of patching the general objection to make it watertight. It still seems to me to be more or less inconceivable—on the basis of the currently available arguments at least—that there is a successful ontological argument. But the only evidence which I can point to in support of this contention is the clear failure of all of the kinds of ontological arguments which have hitherto been produced.

5. One Last Comment

Langtry is puzzled by my suggestion that one might want to consider the interpretation of ontological arguments in which implicit protective operators are inserted, particularly given the fact that these inserted operators upset the validity of the arguments. "Why would the theist in this context think it worth discussing a definition or theory that the theist realises that atheists and agnostics all reject?". However, it is important to recall that there is an independent motivation behind the suggestion that ontological arguments typically admit of several different readings, which derives from the classic discussion of *Proslogion II* in Lewis (1971). If it is plausible to suppose that there are typically several different readings of ontological arguments between which it is easy to slide, then we have an explanation of why it is that theists have occasionally been attracted by the thought that ontological arguments are successful proofs of the existence of God. On Lewis'—admittedly controversial—interpretation of *Proslogion II*, there are two different readings of the argument, one of which is invalid, the other of which has a question-begging premise, and between which it is not implausible that one might fail to distinguish. In my book, I suggested that Lewis' strategy can be extended to apply to a great variety of ontological arguments, and that it does give a plausible explanation of the attractiveness of those arguments.

Even if this response to Langtry is deemed unsuccessful, there is an even more important—and, in my view, more substantial—reason for objecting to the general objection on the grounds that it provides an unsatisfactory understanding of what the theist is doing when she advances an ontological argument with a premise which contains vocabulary whose use requires an ontological commitment to God. Whatever the theist may be thinking, the crucial point is that a satisfactory ontological argument cannot contain any referential apparatus whose use in the premises brings with it an ontological commitment to God. If the theist advances an argument which does contain such referential apparatus, then it is clear that atheists and agnostics will reject those premises; at best, they will only accept them under the scope of protective operators which ward of the problematic commitment (but which also serve to disrupt the validity of the arguments). If the theist wishes to replace the problematic premise with something else which does not incur the problematic commitment, then the theist is free to do so; but the effect of this is to produce a new argument—and until the new argument is actually given, there is no reason at all to think that there is a successful argument to be had. Moreover—as we pointed out in the previous paragraph—it won't do to half-heartedly acknowledge the problem, e.g. by adding 'def.' as an annotation to the argument, while actually sliding backwards and forwards between the initial question-begging interpretation on which the argument is valid, and the amended non-question-begging interpretation on which the argument is simply invalid. Where a theist advances a premise which contains referential vocabulary whose use brings with it an ontological commitment to God, the non-theist will only accept the premise if it is prefixed with an operator which cancels that commitment—and, in all actual cases, the addition of the operator is sufficient to disrupt the validity of the original argument (assuming that it was, indeed, valid).

References

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