MODALITY AND THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

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Let '*p*' stand for 'God exists' and consider the argument (¹).

1.	$p \supset \Box p$	Prem.
2.	$\sim p \supset \Box \sim p$	Prem.
3.	$\sim \Box \sim p$	Prem.
4.	$\sim \sim p$	2, 3, M.T.
5.	p	4, D.N.

Suppose we accept 1 and 2. That is, suppose we are sufficiently impressed by the requirements of perfection to concede that if there is a perfect God, then he necessarily exists, without thereby conceding his existence. We can do this provided we concede that his non-existence is also a necessary matter. We are conceding, in effect, that if there *can* be a perfect God, then he necessarily exists. It is like saying that if a square can be the figure with the greatest area per unit perimeter, then a square is necessarily such a figure, and that a square's not being such a figure is equally a necessary matter.

Premise 3 has no virtue onits own. Leibniz recognizes this and tries to prove 3 by appealing to the compatibility of simple properties. But his proof is unconvincing. Norman Malcolm appeals to the place of 'God' in the thought and lives of human beings. (²) Yet as James Cargile points out, that place is often surrounded by doubt and suspicion and hence the lack of an inconsistency proof fails to establish a presumption of consistency. (³) Otherwise a critic could just as reasonably say

(¹) Cf. Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection* (La Salle, 1962), Ch. 2, for a needlessly more complicated version. See also Wayne A. Lenhardt, «Hartshorne's Presupposition», *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1974), 345-49.

(²) See «Anselm's Ontological Arguments», *Philosophical Review* 69 (1960).

that the lack of a consistency proof establishes a presumption of inconsistency, which contradicts 3.

Suppose a friend of the ontological argument tries to assemble support for 3 by falling back on possibilities. Suppose he argues that conceding 1 and 2 is often to concede that the antecedent *might* be true in each case. He gets us to say 'If God exists (and he might), then he necessarily exists' and 'If God does not exist (and he might not), then he necessarily fails to exist'. This pair of remarks seems incoherent, since the possibility of God's existence entails his necessary existence and the possibility of his non-existence entails his necessary non-existence. (4) Suppose the pair is symbolized as

6. $(p \supset \Box p) . \Diamond p.$
7. $(\sim p \supset \Box \sim p) . \Diamond \sim p.$

Since $\Diamond p \rightarrow \sim \Box \sim p$, therefore 6 . 7 yields p, which in conjunction with 6 yields $\Box p$. Since $\Diamond p \rightarrow \sim \Box p$, therefore 6 . 7 similarly yields $\Box \sim p$. Suppose the friend of the ontological argument then claims that we must choose between 6 and 7, in accordance with a principle of least change. Whereas initially, in our indifference to the antecedents of 1 and 2, we affirm *both* 6 and 7, we now realize that we cannot have

8. $\Diamond p . \Diamond \sim p.$

But instead of simply reverting to

9. $\sim (\Diamond p . \Diamond \sim p).$

we should, if we can, attempt to save one conjunct in 8. At this point, the relative generosity of non-theists, and especially agnostics, becomes significant. We are faced with choosing between $\Diamond p$, where this can presently be used to generate $\Box p$ via 1 and 2, and $\Diamond \sim p$, where this can be similarly

(3) See «The Ontological Argument» *Philosophy* 50 (1975), 69-80.
(4) See Malcolm *op. cit.*

used to generate $\Box \sim p$. If non-theists are obliged to choose between endorsing the necessity of God's existence and endorsing the necessity of God's non-existence, then most would choose the former, and not for intellectually dishonest reasons. (5) This can provide a rationale for preferring $\Diamond p$. Given $\Diamond p$, then we can derive 3 and the original argument is to that extent supported.

There are ways of resisting such support, of course. We could review the acceptance of 1 and 2. Or we could refuse to minimise the change from 8 and replace it by 9. Yet despite Humean counterclaims, 1 and 2 do have a certain plausibility. And if we do come as far as accepting 6 and 7 even temporarily, then there is something odd about reverting to 9 merely because we don't want to *have* to choose between the conjuncts in 8.

A more effective response is to resist 6 and 7. The friend of the ontological argument tries to exploit our indifference toward the antecedents in 1 and 2 by formulating it in terms of alethic possibility. But an indifferent 'It might be that *p*' should be formulated in terms of epistemic possibility. And epistemic possibility does not entail alethic possibility. For instance, if q is a mathematical theorem with an unknown truth value, then a mathematician can coherently say 'If q, then $\Box q$, and if $\sim q$, then $\Box \sim q$; q (espitemically) might be true, and it equally might not be'. He is not thereby endorsing the alethic $\Diamond q$, or $\Diamond \sim q$. Thus, someone *can* concede 1 and 2 and at the same time say 'It might be that *p*, and it equally might not be', without endorsing 6 and 7.

This shows the importance of realizing that 1 and 2 are equivalent to

10. $\Diamond p \supset \Box p$.
11. $\Diamond \sim p \supset \Box \sim p$. (6)

(5) Not all philosophers would; e.g. J.N. Findlay, «Can God's Existence Be Disproved ?» in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (eds.) Flew and MacIntyre (London, 1955).

(6) Since $\Diamond p$ by 2 implies p, and p by 1 implies $\Box p$; and since $\Diamond \sim p$ by 1 implies $\sim p$, and $\sim p$ by 2 implies $\Box \sim p$.

Given 10 and 11, there is no room for alethic contingency with respect to *p*, something which is *independent* of epistemic considerations. For example, someone can say 'If $\sqrt{81}$ can equal 8, then it necessarily equals 8, whereas if it can fail to equal 8, then it necessarily does not' even though he knows that $\sqrt{81} = 9$. He therefore would not say '$\sqrt{81}$ (epistemically) might equal 8, and it equally might not'. On the other hand, someone who does not know *p*'s truth value can be as indifferent toward $\Diamond p$ as he is toward $\Box p$, and as indifferent toward $\Diamond \sim p$ as he is toward $\Box \sim p$. He is therefore not obliged to choose a position where a qualified preference for $\Diamond p$ becomes a reason for accepting an unqualified $\Diamond p$.

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