ON THE MODAL VERSION
OF THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

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My purpose here is to examine an interesting formal version of the ontological argument which has been presented by R.L. Purtill[1], a version based on Charles Hartshorne's work.[2]

Purtill's argument is based on a theorem of S_5, and on two additional assumptions:

(1) $(p \prec Lp) \supset (Mp \prec p)$

(2) $(\exists x) (Px) \prec L (\exists x) (Px)$

(3) $M (\exists x((px)$

(1) can easily be proved in S_5.

(2) is a tentative definition of God, that has been named by Hartshorne «Anselm's Principle» namely «if the statement 'an absolute perfect being exists' is true at all, it is necessarily true.»

(3) expresses the proposition: «It is possible that the statement 'an absolutely perfect being exists' is true.»

On the basis of these three premises it can easily be proved that

(4) $(\exists x) Px$

i.e. «An absolutely perfect being exists.»

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In a provocative and much-debated article written in 1948, J.N. Findlay argued that an ontological proof of the non-existence of God, can be produced.

Through kind of transcendental argument, Findlay claimed that the

[1] R.L. PURTILL, Logic for Philosophers (Harper & Row Publishers) 1971; pp. 256-260.

[2] The Logic of Perfection (Open Court Publishing Co., La Salle, Ill.) 1962, pp. 50-52.

«true object of religious reverence» must be a thing which does not simply happen to exist, «as a mere matter of fact.» «An object of this sort would doubtless deserve ... quasi-religious attitudes, but it would not deserve the utter self-abandonment peculiar to the religious frame of mind.» (³)

Consequently, God – if He exists – exists in a necessary manner. But on the other hand, 'God exists' can by no means be a necessary statement, from a logical point of view.

Findlay's argument tries in this manner to prove that «Anselm's Principle» as a definition of God, entails His necessary non-existence.

In his reply to Findlay, G.E. Hughes claimed that Findlay's argument would have been overwhelming had Anselm's Principle involved analytical necessity. Hughes argued, however, that 'God exists' may be regarded as a synthetically necessary statement, rather than as an analytical one.

Similar suggestions were raised by other philosophers on various occasions, and different tentative proposals were made to specify the kind of necessity we are refering to in Anselm's Principle. The following are a few outstanding examples.

Alvin Plantinga reaffirmed that this necessity is not analytical arguing from the fact that the denial of an analytical statement is self-contradictory. If 'God exists' were an analytical statement, its denial 'God does not exist' would entail two contradictory statements, and this is obviously not the case. As an alternative Plantinga suggested that we interpret «God's necessary existence as meaning that it is absurd to ask 'why does God exist?'» (⁴)

An analogous point was brought up by R.L. Franklin (⁵). The position of Franklin and Plantinga is in essence similar to a wide-spread view found in medieval Arabic and Jewish philosophy. Other modern interpretations see 'necessity' as synonymous with 'indepen-

(³) J.N. FINDLAY, «Can God's Existence Be Disproved»; Mind (1949) Reprinted in New Essays in Philosophical Theology; ed. by Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, London, 1955.

(⁴) Alvin PLANTINGA, Necessary Being in Faith and Philosophy; ed. by A. Plantinga (Grand Rapids) 1964 reprinted in The Cosmological Arguments, ed. by D.R. Burrill (Anchor Books) 1967; pp. 125-141.

(⁵) R.L. FRANKLIN, «Necessary Being»; Australasian Journal of Philosophy; August 1957.

dence'. Despite their differences, all these authors agree that this 'theological necessity' cannot be simply identified as logical necessity, and that some other concept must be developed. As Geach emphasizes «the necessity of contingency that is here in question is not the logical necessity or contingency of some (existential) statement. Accordingly the attacks on the notion of a logically necessary existential statement simply do not touch the third 'way' at all.» These «attacks» refer, no doubt, to Findlay's objections, or similar ones.

At this point we can proceed to examine Hartshorne's own position in his attempt to deal with this problem, Hartshorne recruits Carnap's notion of meaning postulates which should express only «ideas of metaphysical generality, ideas of unlimited range in space-time and applicable to all grades of existence, low or high.» Hartshorne concludes that

«It may be that Carnap's proposal, qualified and developed in some such way will solve the technical problem of reconciling the logical meaning of 'necessary' with the ontological in the unique divine case.» (⁶)

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How are these considerations related to the modalized formalization of the ontological argument, proposed by Purtill?

From a strictly formal point of view, we can speak of various kinds of alethic modalities. These varieties can be distinguished by means of standard semantical methods, i.e. by establishing a model system and determining the conditions which a model set has to satisfy in order to be an alternative to another set in the system.

We can stipulate additional conceptual conditions in order to assure that conjunctions such as 'John is a bachelor and John is married' will be impossible.

There may be other species of alethic modalities. The most common are undoubtedly the theoretical, related to a physical or scientific theory. 'The projectile moved faster than light' is impossi-

(⁶) The Logic of Perfection; pp. 54-55.

ble, not on logical or conceptual grounds, but on theoretical ones.

In addition to these kinds of alethic modalities we could postulate others, even metaphysical modalities, to be defined in the context of a metaphysical theory, as Hartshorne foresaw.

The need to differentiate among the various alethic modalities, constitute the reason for the collapse of Purtill's version of the ontological argument.

The three assumptions will have to be rewritten:

a. We can retain (1) accepting a kind of «typical ambiguity» without a need to specify the exact type of modality. In doing so we assume only that the modality behaves as in a S_5-system although this is by *no means obvious.*

(1) can be written as follows

$$(1)' \quad (p \prec L_k p) \supset (M_k p \prec p)$$

where k is variable index.

b. Let us suppose that we here have in mind a determined type of necessity, and let us call it L_i, identical neither with logical necessity (L_0), nor with conceptual necessity (L_1). Therefore (2) must be rewritten as follows:

$$(2)' \quad (\exists x) Px \prec L_i (\exists x) Px$$

c. When we are to rewrite (3), however, we hope to ensure that we now operate with the same type of possibility, as in (2), i.e.

$$(3)' \quad Mi (\exists x) (Px)$$

or with a modality M_j, such that for every p,

$$M_j (p) \supset M_i (p)$$

When philosophers try to argue for the truth of (3); they speak of the conceivability of God. Conceivability surely implies only logical or conceptual possibility, i.e. M_0 or M_1, or both. Thus, the use of any other stronger possiblity, M_i, in (3) is unjustified. Even now if we speak of L_i, instead of L_o, the possibility of $(\exists x) Px$, becomes problematic, a fact already recognized in Gaunilo's critique on Anselm.

In accordance with the above considerations, the ontological argument must be stated as follows:

(1) $(p \prec L_i p) \supset (M_i p \prec p)$

(2) $(\exists x) (Px) \prec L_i (\exists x) Px$

(3) $M_j (\exists x) Px$

In order to make this argument valid, we must add an additional premiss

$Mj (p) \supset Mi (p)$

that can neither be demonstrated, nor justifiably assumed.

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