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ANOTHER NOTE ON THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Ronald E. Beanblossom

It is commonplace to pay homage to the ontological argument by noting that it is a much debated argument. Moreover, since the appearance of Malcolm's essay on Anselm, it is commonplace to speak of Anselm's second formulation or proof of the ontological argument.¹ I shall argue that this formulation is no more successful than the first. Next, I shall argue that contrary to Malcolm's claim, there is an appropriate use of 'possible' such that it is not self-contradictory to claim "God necessarily exists but it is possible God does not exist."

I

Malcolm correctly argues that even though contingent existence is not a perfection, necessary existence may be a perfection in the sense that it is superior to contingent existence. Indeed, God is conceived to be a being upon whom we are dependent for our existence but a being who is not dependent upon anything else for his own existence. Because of this conception, Anselm claims that God's existence must either be impossible or necessary.² Suppose God does not exist. Since nothing cannot produce something, if he were to begin to exist he would be dependent upon something else for his existence. Hence, if he does not exist he cannot begin to exist. On the other hand, if he does exist he cannot begin or cease to exist for this would again make him dependent upon something else for his existence. But if his existence is not contingent, then it is necessary.

- A. 1. If God does not exist, then his existence is impossible.
2. If God does exist, then he necessarily exists.
3. Therefore either it is impossible that God exists or God necessarily exists.

Proponents of the ontological argument claim that God's existence is not impossible for it is neither self-contradictory nor logically absurd to assert that he does exist.³

4. It is not the case that God's existence is impossible.
5. Therefore, God necessarily exists.



The fourth premise is objectionable. God's existence *is* impossible—given that he does not exist. The point is not that I claim to know this premise is false. Rather, I claim it is dubious. To assert that God's existence is not impossible assumes what is to be proven, namely, that God exists. It has been a common assumption on the part of proponents of the ontological argument that there is only one instance in which God's existence is impossible, to wit, the concept of God is self-contradictory. However, unwittingly, Malcolm makes explicit another instance in which God's existence would be impossible, namely, if God does not exist. Consider the concept of God; he is omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, creator of all things, and eternal, i.e., God necessarily never begins nor ceases to exist (this latter definition is consistent with God's never having existed). This concept of God is consistent; yet, if God does not exist, then God's existence would nonetheless be impossible. For if God is eternal and he does not exist, then he could never begin to exist, i.e., his existence would be impossible. "Since He cannot come into existence, if He does not exist His existence is impossible."⁴ Thus, two things would appear to make God's existence impossible: (a) the concept of God is self-contradictory or (b) God does not exist. To claim God's existence is not impossible must, therefore, presuppose that He does exist.

To see more clearly the way in which the above argument begs the question, consider the following argument. Suppose one argues as follows:

- B. 1. If Beanblossom is thinking of the number 1, then Beanblossom is thinking of an odd number.
2. It is not the case that Beanblossom is thinking of an odd number (e.g., Beanblossom is thinking of the number 2).
3. Therefore, Beanblossom is not thinking of the number 1.

The character of this *modus tollens* argument is that in the second premise we are explicitly affirming something (that Beanblossom is thinking of the number 2) which leads us to deny that Beanblossom is thinking of an odd number. Of course, once we accept the premises, they jointly entail "Beanblossom is not thinking of the number 1."

The same feature occurs in all *modus tollens* arguments in the premise which denies the consequent of the conditional statement. In denying the consequent our denial is based upon something else which, implicitly or explicitly, we have affirmed or denied. There must be some reason for denying the consequent of the conditional statement.

Consider the argument

- C. 1. If God does not exist, then God's existence is impossible
2. God's existence is not impossible

3. Therefore God exists

What reason(s) do we have for denying the consequent of the first premise? Our reasons are twofold: (a) the concept of God is not self-contradictory and (b) God exists. To be sure the conjunction of premises 1 and 2 entail that God exists. But God's existence has already been presupposed; to claim God's existence is not impossible must presuppose that he does exist. Thus, the second formulation of Anselm's ontological argument does not escape a common criticism of the first, to wit, it begs the question.

II

Malcolm has claimed that many criticisms of the ontological argument rest upon contradictory propositions and, consequently, fail. For example, Kant's criticism of the ontological argument requires that the premise "God necessarily exists" be interpreted as a conditional statement because he wants the antecedent clause "...to imply that it is *possible* that God does *not* exist. The whole point of Kant's analysis is to try to show that it is possible to 'reject the subject'."⁵ Thus, Kant supposes that the presupposition "God necessarily exists" is equivalent to the conditional proposition "If God exists, then he necessarily exists." Malcolm proposes to make explicit in Kant's conditional proposition the possibility of rejecting the subject:

"If God exists (and it is possible that He does not), then He necessarily exists." But now it is apparent, I think, that these philosophers have arrived at a self-contradictory position.... Their position is self-contradictory in the following way. On the one hand, they agree that the proposition "God necessarily exists" is an a priori truth.... On the other hand, they think that it is correct to analyze the proposition in such a way that it will entail the proposition "It is possible that God does not exist." ...it is rather the case that they are *incompatible* with one another! Can anything be clearer than the conjunction "God necessarily exists but it is possible that He does not exist" is self-contradictory?⁶

What I shall show is that there is a sense of the term 'possible' such that it is not self-contradictory to assert either that "God's existence is impossible but it is possible that he does exist" or that "God necessarily exists but it is possible that he does not exist." It does seem *possible* that God's existence is either impossible or necessary. What we mean in asserting that God's existence or nonexistence is possible is that we do not *know* whether God does or does not exist. Thus, for example, to say that "God's existence is impossible, but it is possible that he does exist" is to say "God's existence is impossible, but I do

not know that he does not exist.”

The conjunction, “God’s existence is impossible, but it is possible that he does exist” is not, contrary to Malcolm’s claim, self-contradictory. The first conjunct, “God’s existence is impossible,” uses a logical modality. This modality is used because proponents of the ontological argument consider whether the concept of God is self-contradictory. However, the second conjunct, “it is possible that he does exist,” uses an epistemic modality, i.e., “I do not know that God does not exist.” Moreover, “God’s existence is impossible” does not entail that anyone *knows* that God does not exist. Thus, since ‘possible’ is used in different but consistent senses, the conjunction, “God’s existence is impossible, but it is possible that he does exist,” is *not* self-contradictory.

Likewise, to say that “God necessarily exists, but it is possible that he does not exist,” is to say “God necessarily exists, but I do not know that he exists.” From the proposition “God necessarily exists” it does not follow that “I know God exists” is true. If what we mean by ‘possible’ in the second conjunct is that we lack knowledge of God’s existence or nonexistence, then, contrary to Malcolm’s claim, the conjunction “God necessarily exists, but it is possible that he does not exist” is *not* self-contradictory. Though it must be acknowledged that this conjunction appears to be inconsistent, the apparent inconsistency is removed when the meaning of ‘necessary’ and ‘possible’ is made explicit. “God necessarily exists” uses a logical modality whereas “it is possible that he does not exist” uses an epistemic modality.

Thus, there is at least one sense of the term ‘possible,’ a sense not dealt with in ordinary modal logic, which Malcolm has failed to address in his critique of Kant’s (among others) criticism of the ontological argument. Because Malcolm fails to address epistemic modalities, his argument against critics of the ontological argument is not compelling. Moreover, I have shown that Malcolm’s version of Anselm’s second formulation of the ontological argument begs the question.

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NOTES

1. Normal Malcolm, *Knowledge and Certainty*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1963), p. 145.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 149-50.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 149-50.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 157-58.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 158.