The asymmetry in Tobia's modal arguments

1 Introduction

In his article "Does Religious belief infect Philosophical Analysis"[1], Kevin Patrick Tobia presents two modal ontological arguments, which he claims to be of equal validity and strength:

The common basis:
1. (Assumption) That which is possibly necessary is necessary.
2. (Definition) A being has maximal greatness if and only if, necessarily, it exists and is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good.

The positive sequel:
3. (Premise) It is possible that there is a being with maximal greatness.
4. Therefore, necessarily, there exists a being with maximal greatness.
5. Therefore, there exists a being with maximal greatness.

The negative sequel:
3. (Premise) It is possible that there is not a being with maximal greatness.
4. Therefore, necessarily, there does not exist a being with maximal greatness.
5. Therefore, there does not exist a being with maximal greatness.

Tobia had people of different religious persuasion (theist, agnostic, and atheist) evaluate these arguments, and found an asymmetry in their responses, in general theists considering the positive argument much stronger than the negative one, agnostics considering it slightly stronger, and atheists considering it weaker. This lead him to conclude a bias from religious persuasion to philosophical analysis.

Below I argue that the arguments are genuinely asymmetric, and that the correlation found allows no such conclusion at all. Religious persuasions come in many forms, but for simplicity I shall consider only one specific kind of theism and one specific kind of atheism. My argument can be extended to several other kinds, though.

I shall also call a being that is (locally) omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good, "excellent".

2 Validity

The first question regards validity. If one accepts the model, the arguments are both equally valid[2]. There was some difference in answers regarding validity, but my hunch is that those come mostly from a misunderstanding of the term, despite a definition having been given. Whether one considers the premiss true or not has no effect on validity – but a non-logician might confuse validity and soundness. Theologians presumably having less logical training, they would be more prone to commit this error, and it would be interesting to see the correlation between study field and difference in validity estimates. But I shall leave this point, which also isn't Tobia's main point.

3 Strength

The second question regards strength. The argument has three inputs: an assumption (step 1), a definition (step 2), and a premiss (step 3), and all three influence the strength of the argument.

3.1 The assumption

The assumption is not true in all modal logics, but it seems unlikely that the same person would use different logics in interpreting the two arguments. Therefore I shall ignore that possible source of difference, and follow a possible-worlds interpretation (as did Tobia in his analysis) with a locally transitive, reflexive, and symmetric ("equivalent") accessibility relation, so that there is a set of worlds including the actual world ("W_a") that are all possible for each other. This makes the assumption true.

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1 Tobia, Kevin P., *Does Religious Belief Infect Philosophical Analysis?* Religion, Brain & Behavior, 2016
2 There may be an issue with mixing up various types, or levels, of modality. I shall ignore that here, though.

3.2 The premiss

Given our interpretation above, one step influencing the strength is the premiss.

Since the premisses make opposite claims, even if all else were equal, the two arguments might already be of hugely different strength[3]. However, theists are suppose to believe the positive premiss and atheists the negative one, so much of this difference would disappear under factor analysis. The remainder would come down to whether theists would consider a world without God possible, or atheists a world with God. If one thinks the world exists only because God exists, one is unlikely to consider a godless world possible – but if one believes the world exists brutely, one might well believe that a God creating a world could have existed the same way. If that is correct, one would expect the positive argument to be slightly stronger than the negative.

Conversely, the notion of necessary excellence being difficult, the atheist has the easier job: all it takes for him to prove his premiss is to show a possible world in which no excellent being exists – for a fortiori, if no excellent being exists, no necessarily excellent being exists. The theist, however, will need to find a world with an excellent being, and then show this being is necessarily excellent.

These differences are absolute, in that they exist equally for both sides, and might lead to unequal strength attribution between the positive and negative argument (as seen in the agnostic answers), but not to differences between theists and atheists in answering.

So if all else were equal, we might have seen all groups answering the way the agnostics do, by giving an unequal strength to the two arguments. But all else definitely isn't equal.

3.3 The definition

A strong point of the modal argument is that one is free to choose the accessibility relation, and thereby the set of possible worlds, provided it contain both W_a and a world in which the premise is true. By choosing that set one *defines* 'necessarily' and 'maximal greatness': a being is maximally great ("God") if it exists with the requested properties in each world *in that set*. And this is where the asymmetry enters: different sets lead to different notions of God.

That means that another step influencing the strength is the definition.

Consider the empty world ("W_0"). My theist believes that logic, mathematics, and other abstracta depend on God, so for her W_0 is truly empty – void of abstracta too. Especially it has no worlds reachable (not even itself), so it is not in the set of possible worlds that contain W_a. It is true that God would not exist in that world, but since it is not a possible world under any equivalent accessibility relation, that doesn't affect the argument. And for her, the very existence of abstracta undergirds the positive premise and refutes the negative premise.

My atheist, on the other hand, believes that God, if existing, would be subject to logic, and abstracta somehow or other just exist (or work without existing, as with nominalism), even in W_0 – and so for him W_0 is still a possible world, and one that clearly refutes the positive and proves the negative premise.

Obviously, for the theist the positive argument is much stronger than the negative, and for the atheist the other way around. The agnostic can go either way, but for her the main issue would be whether abstracta can "just exist", as the atheist claims. Given that they don't have an obvious aseity, the way some versions of God have, nor a will that could will its own existence, the way some other versions of God have[4], the a priori likelihood of God "just existing" seems higher than the a priori likelihood of abstracta "just existing", and this would be reflected in their response. Being agnostic, she would find neither argument convincingly strong, so the difference between the two strengths would be small - which again is just what we see.

Now all I have seen is the results published in the article – maybe the raw data would refute this interpretation by showing that agnostics rate both arguments as very strong. It actually is quite possible that both arguments are sound, but that would not lead to agnosticism (though together with other arguments not dealt with here it might, of course). Let me explain by example.

Imagine a deaf couple trying to establish whether there is music in the living room – that is, whether someone with good hearing would hear music if placed there. The wife reasons as follows: "Let's define pervasive music as music that, if it can be heard in any room in the house, it can be heard in all rooms. Then, if there is pervasive music in any room in the house, it will be in the living room too, and there will be music here. And there is a pervasive sound in some room, because our eldest son is playing rock music in his bedroom. Ergo, there is pervasive music, ergo there is pervasive music in the living room."

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3   Consider a pair of premises "It is [not] possible that there are two sets of two marbles each, counting up to five".
4   The point here is that abstracta are what they are, whereas God can be chosen in a way to maximise the likelihood of aseity

The husband rejects this reasoning, as follows: "The house extends to the garden shed at the far end of the lawn, which is so isolated that no music reaches there. So there is one room that has no music, ergo there is no pervasive music in the living room."

Of course both are right, because by using different definitions of the house they also have different definitions of 'pervasive music'. There is music in the living room that pervades through the whole main building, but not to the garden shed.

Likewise, both the positive and the negative conclusion can be right, in that there is an excellent being that exists as such in all non-empty worlds, but not in the empty world. However, someone believing that would be unlikely to call oneself an agnostic.

3.4 Another definition

There is still another factor influencing the outcome of the research: the meaning of *strong*, a word explicitly left undefined by Tobia.

Let an utterly great being be a being that necessarily exists and is excellent in any non-empty world. Clearly, an utterly great being necessarily exists in W_a.

The negative conclusion is *firmer* than the positive one: that there is no God in W_0 is exceedingly probable, even if one believes that the existence of any non-empty world would require an utterly great, being.

The positive conclusion has more *substance* than the negative one, in that it affirms the existence of a being that is not disproven by the negative conclusion – the negative conclusion only forbids a maximally, not an utterly, great being.

For a theist (who considers 'God' a synthetic notion), the exact limit (beyond the actual) of God's necessity might be less relevant than His existence, whereas for an atheist (who works with the mere analytic *concept* of 'God'), any internal contradiction in the definition would suffice for his goals. Where the theist might merely react with "Ah, so I misunderstood God's nature somewhat", the atheist would consider the concept disproven..

4 Conclusion

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Whether this is the case could theoretically be tested with a more detailed argument, indicating exactly what shape the set of possible worlds takes.