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Recent Objections of Ontological Arguments

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This paper summarizes recent objections to modern versions of the ontological argument (OA)[1]. I do not weigh one argument against another, nor offer counter-counter arguments to OAs. This paper only highlights some objections to OAs to synthesize the information in one place. Though there is some overlap between various arguments, each OA should be judged based on its own merits. Each argument has its nuances, operating presuppositions, and modes of logic used. Opponents of the OA argue that despite the many attempts to strengthen Anselm's original argument it can be shown that OAs fail to offer a theistic proof for God.

One prominent version of Anselm's argument is Malcolm's and

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[1] Represented by the following articles: Gianluca Di Muzio, "A Simplified Ontological Argument and Fictional Entities," *Think* 14, no. 40 (2015): 101-107. http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1672117711?accountid=12085.; Yulia Gorbatova, "Malcolm's Version of the Ontological Argument: Several Questionable Aspects," *Ssrn Electronic Journal*, (2014); Junguo Z, "A Critical Examination of Anselm's Ontological Argument," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 12, no. 1 (2017): 137-150.; Graham Oppy, "Ontological Arguments," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/ontological-arguments/; Ted Parent, "The Modal Ontological Argument Meets Modal Fictionalism," *Analytic Philosophy* 57, no. 4 (2016): 338-352.; William E. Mann, "The Ontological Presuppositions of the Ontological Argument," 2016;

Hartshorne's modal OA. In Yulia Gorbatova's article, "Malcolm's Version of the Ontological Argument: Several Questionable Aspects", he argues that Malcolm's and Hartshorne's modal OA is unsound or ambiguous, and the logical methods are questionable.[2] First, he argues that "Malcolm's formalism has an inadequate treatment of *de re* modality."[3] In his own words,

> [Malcolm's] proof goes all the way with the modality *de dicto*, it argues that the fact of God's existence is necessary [His existence is necessary]. However, the conclusion is committed to the modality *de re* – it claims that God must exist [He necessarily exists]. Such a transformation of modality…is illicit, since *de re* modality is about necessary things, while *de dicto* is about the necessary truth of statements.[4]

Furthermore, Gorbatova thinks the assumption that God is not a contradictory being is questionable, arguing that it is easy to conceive that God is contradictory.[5] He also criticizes the OA by arguing that the term "God" remains unclear arguing that "It can be understood as a logically proper name, as a proper name or as a predicate."[6] He argues that if existence is not a predicate, then necessary existence

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[2] Gorbatova, "Malcolm's Version of the Ontological Argument."

[3] Ibid., 3.

[4] Ibid., 5.

[5] Ibid., 4.

[6] Ibid., 6.

is not a predicate.[7] Furthermore, Gorbatova mentions Dragalina-Chernaya's criticisms of the OA by saying the OA is a performative proof.[8] She is cited saying, "[performative proof is] not [a] transition from some true statements to the others, but it is a transition from some sound actions to another, thereby is receiving their validity."[9] In addition, Gorbatova finds fault with the idea that those who do not believe in God just did not try to think hard enough; and argue that "Kant's criticism opposes any nonempirical attempts to demonstrate the existence of any object, including abstract ones."[10] Thus, supporters of theistic proofs need to justify non-empirical methods.[11]

Another OA relies on distinctions between mediated and unmediated causal powers.[12] Gianluca Di Muzio, in his article, *A Simplified Ontological Argument and Fictional Entities,* tries to show that Matthew's and Baker's simplified OA

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 7.

[10] Ibid., 8.

[11] Ibid.

[12] E. Yang, "Against an Updated Ontological Argument." *Res Philosophica* 95, no. 1 (2018): 179-187. Yang, in his article, examines a recent attempt by Matthew and Baker to simplify Anselm's ontological argument employing the notion of mediated and unmediated causal powers. Yang argues that some of the key assumptions of Matthew and Baker simplified OA can be rejected. He also argues, that once the underlying assumptions have been uncovered it is subject to the same criticisms of Anselm's original version.

"absurdly entails the existence of all kinds of imaginary entities."[13] According to Muzio, this was Gaunilo's best-known criticism. Like Gaunilo, in this imaginary dialogue Muzio purports that Gaunilo may object to the idea 'that it is better to have unmediated power than mediated power' by applying this principle to the most evil being that one can think of with unparalleled cunning and brutality (even his appearance would be horrifying), e.g., "Darth Vader." Thus, Gaunilo thinks, that

> [if] the most evil lord one can think of only had mediated causal powers, it would be possible to conceive of someone worse: a lord who is the most evil one can think of and has unmediated causal powers….(therefore) Darth Vader (the most evil lord one can think of) is real.[14]

Muzio wants to make a point to show how Matthews and Baker's simplified OA entails the existence of all kinds of imaginary entities. Muzio argues,

> [if] you eliminated all talk of existence from your proof to replace it with talk of mediated and unmediated causal powers, you can no longer rely on necessary existence as a property setting the concept of God apart from the concepts of all merely imaginary entities.[15]

> Ted Parent argues that Plantinga's modal argument is guilty of an existential

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[13] Muzio, "A Simplified Ontological Argument and Fictional Entities."

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

fallacy if his argument is interpreted in a non-fictionalist manner.[16] He argues, "God' may be defined *ad libitum*—yet it does not follow that *there is* anything meeting the definition."[17] In general, Parent states that the fallacy in the modal argument is that "the modal facts represented are assumed to exist independently of fiction."[18] He adds, "thanks to cautious fictionalism, one cannot just assume that there are fiction-independent modal facts."[19] Parent argues that if cautious fictionalism has not been ruled out then the modal argument does not advance the theist's position.[20] Parent also argues that Plantinga's argument is guilty of the existential fallacy of whether multiple worlds exist or not.[21] Even if modal realism is true, he argues, the modal argument commits an existential fallacy. Parent thinks the modal OA abuses the device of possible worlds, "Indeed, our kind of fictionalist thinks possible worlds are just meant to regiment or systematize our understanding of things. . . . it is fallacious to presume that modal logic is a window to our world."[22]

Shifting our focus to Anselm's original argument, William E. Mann, in

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[16] Parent, "The Modal Ontological Argument Meets Modal Fictionalism."

[17] Ibid., 338.

[18] Ibid., 349.

[19] Ibid., 349.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., 349.

[22] Ibid., 351.

"The Ontological Presuppositions of the Ontological Argument", tries to show that if we were to grant Anselm's presuppositions of "the *in intellectu–in re* distinction, the distinction between one's conceiving of a thing and one's conceiving it to exist, and the doctrine that existence is a property" his OA fails to offer a theistic proof for the existence of God.[23] Of course, many philosophers argue against the OA by denying one or more of these presuppositions. Mann thinks that refuting the OA based on denying that existence is a property is problematic for two reasons: one, it is not at all clear that denying that existence is a property refutes all versions of the OA, and two, existence being a property is not utterly indefensible. Mann thinks that preoccupation with the question of whether existence is a property or not has distracted many from more problematic issues with Anselm's OAs in his *Proslogion*. In Mann's revision of Anslem's OA, "property model" means to add the property of existence to a thing conceived *in intellectu*. To capture his reasoning, I quote the following:

> On the property model of conceiving to exist, to conceive of a being as existing is to add existence to an *in intellectu* being. But that is precisely what makes an *in intellectu* being an *in re* being. The upshot is disastrous. For, when the property model of conceiving to exist is conjoined to the *in intellectu–in re* distinction, Anselm can give no coherent account of the

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[23] Mann, "The Ontological Presuppositions of the Ontological Argument," 202.

difference between a thing's existing *in re* and it's being conceived to exist. To exist *in re,* an *in intellectu* being must possess existence. To be conceived to exist, an *in intellectu* being, as the object of conception, must possess existence (just as to be conceived to be red, it must possess redness). What then, on this scheme of things, could be the difference between a thing's existing and its merely being conceived to exist? The answer seems to be— none.[24]

Z. Junguo, in his article, "A Critical Examination of Anselm's Ontological Argument," argues that "Anselm misuses the two types of existence in his ontological comparison leading to a logical contradiction between the different kinds and degrees of existence."[25] To avoid this problem Mann offers a revised solution. He anticipates that his readers may deny that perceiving of a being to exist *in re* is not tantamount to adding the property of existing to that being. Instead, to perceive of a being existing *in re*, the new property it acquires is 'being-conceived-to-exist' (what Mann calls the 'revised property model'). Mann thinks, however, that there seem to be at least two difficulties with the revised property model. First, he argues, if one does not accept the distinction between conceiving of a thing and conceiving of a thing to exist as legitimate then he is not likely to be mollified by

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Junguo, "A Critical Examination of Anselm's Ontological Argument."

the revised account. Secondly, even if we grant this distinction, Mann does not think 'being conceived to exist' is a great-making property, i.e., as he understands it, having the property 'being-conceived-to-exist' than to lack it. It seems, in conclusion, that the revised property model of 'conceiving to exist' is of no help to Anselm in his effort to produce a tempting OA. Mann thinks that the object of Anselm's argument never leaves his understanding as actually existing. To Mann, it seems obvious that a being with the property 'being-conceived-to-exist' does not mean that being has the property of 'existing-*in-re*.'

This next article is an entry in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* written by Graham Oppy.[26] In it, he lists a wide variety of objections to various types of OAs. Oppy mentions that a general criticism of OAs, even amongst theists, is that they are not persuasive, i.e., they do not offer those who do not already believe God exists a compelling reason to think God exists. Oppy argues that any reading of any OA falls prey to any one of three failings: one, yielding invalid results, two, has premises no non-theists will accept or has a benign conclusion with no religious significance.[27]

Oppy then summarizes objections to five types of OAs: definitional,

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[26] Oppy, "Ontological Arguments."

[27] Ibid.

conceptual, modal, Meinongian, and experiential arguments.[28] Definitional arguments introduce ontologically committing vocabulary solely via definition. According to Oppy, the obvious problem here is that "vocabulary cannot then be non-question-beggingly detached from the scope of that definition."[29] Conceptual arguments are arguments "in which ontologically committing vocabulary is introduced solely within the scope of hyperintensional operators (e.g. 'believes that', 'conceives of', etc.)."[30] The claim that I conceive of an existent being than which no greater being can be conceived, admits two kinds of readings: readings which can give cancellation and those which cannot. According to Oppy, on the reading which can give cancellation (such as Mike believes in Santa Claus), an inference to a conclusion that is not canceled is invalid.[31] On the reading which cannot cancel ontological commitments (such as Mike thinks about God) is question-begging for the atheists because he is not committed to God's existence. Modal arguments are arguments with premises that claim something about the possibility or necessity of God's attributes or existence. An objection to these types of OAs is that all an atheist must do is say that it is possible that God does not exist (in at least one possible world). Then the atheist can offer a counterargument: (1)

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

There is at least one possible world where God does not exist, and (2) God exists in all possible worlds if he exists in any. These premises entail that God does not exist in the actual world through modus tollens. Meinongian arguments depend on Meinongian theories of objects. Again, non-theists are not prepared to include god(s) in the group of objects that exists—and hence will be unpersuaded by any argument which tries to use whatever vocabulary is used to discriminate between existing and non-existing as the basis for an argument that god(s) belong in the former group.[32] Experiential arguments are arguments that try to make use of 'externalist' or 'object-involving' accounts of content.[33] The problem here (repeated) is that non-theists will give any expression which purports to refer to God(s) the exact same treatment as expressions purporting fictional entities.

Oppy mentions several other objections to various OAs: (1) existence is not a predicate or a perfection; (2) the concept of God is meaningless, incoherent, and inconsistent; and OAs are ruled out by "the missing explanation argument;" (3) OAs all trade on mistaken uses of singular terms; (4) (some) OAs presuppose a Meinongian approach to ontology; and (5) OAs are question-begging, i.e., they presuppose what they set out to prove.[34]

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

According to Oppy, OAs give reasonable non-theists no reason to change their views.[35] Oppy also argues that OAs have little use as theistic proofs or proving that theism is rational (contrary to Plantinga's view).[36] Oppy thus argues, "those who are disposed to think that theism is irrational need find nothing in ontological arguments to make them change their minds (and those who are disposed to think that theism is true)."[37]

This paper highlighted recent attempts to show how OAs fail to offer a theistic proof for God. It has been argued that OAs either offer premises that atheists do not accept, yield invalid results, or have conclusions that have no religious significance. Some may object that the term 'God' remains unclear. Others will object that it is easy to conceive the basic notion of God as contradictory. The charge that arguments relying on concepts of God fall prey to the existential fallacy is favorable amongst non-theists. With respect to the modal OA, some argue that it is fallacious to think that modal logic can be used as a window into the real world—calling a flag on improper use of modal logic. Furthermore, one can object to the modal argument by arguing that it is possible that God does not exist. Other issues that are of concern are whether there is an actual difference between 'conceiving of

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

a thing' and 'conceiving of a thing to exist' and whether 'existing' or 'being-perceived-to-exist' is a great-making property. What many atheists and theists do agree on is that OAs are unpersuasive as theistic proofs.

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