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Designating the Greatest Possible Being

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Introduction

St. Anselm's famous ontological argument for God's necessary existence is one of the great contributions to philosophical discussion in the history of the discipline. However, since its inception, the argument has not been found wanting for counterarguments or suspicion of its soundness. In this paper, I will utilize a particular strategy in order to defend the argument against potential criticisms that appeal to Quine and Russell's restricted metaphysical positions by reconsidering the scope of Anselm's argument. In this sense, the argument will be reconsidered in a way that promotes a general identification of Anselm's greatest possible being rather than a more specific identification. However, I employ this strategy with the belief that this move benefits a potential abductive argument for the Christian God. In the paper, I will argue that Anselm's argument can apply to God as a unique kind of being, that Anselm's definition of God posits God as a unique ontic referent for existence, and finally, that the many metaphysical positions already assent to Anselm's conceivability thesis.

The Greatest Possible Kind of Being

Reducing the Scope

One of the main goals of any philosophical argument is to be as applicable as possible while remaining logically consistent and coherent. Some objectors to Anselm's argument suggest that Anselm favors a definition of God that is unacceptable to one who does not already accept this belief. Anselm's famous definition is that God is equivalent to "something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought."[1] Authors Scott Aikin and Michael Hodges write, "if we accept Anselm's contention that belief precedes understanding, then the argument cannot rightly be aimed at securing belief. Further, this implies that the argument cannot be addressed to the non-believer. Or, if it is addressed to the non-believer, it will beg the question."[2] This problem is brought about by emphasizing what these authors refer to as the expressive function of the argument as a form of worship. While this function may be important for Anselm's specific idea of the Christian God, the function seems irrelevant if the argument applies to something general in nature. Here, I will employ the use of Saul Kripke's rigid designator concept to present a case for a unique kind of "greatest possible being" as the referent in the argument. I will also suggest that to understand Anselm's move, one may also

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[1] Anselm, "Proslogion," trans. M. J. Charlesworth, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, eds. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 87.

[2] Scott Aikin and Michael Hodges, "St. Anselm's Ontological Argument as Expressive: A Wittgensteinian Reconstruction," *Philosophical Investigations* 37, no. 2 (April 2014): 136.

consider something akin to Thomas Aquinas' fourth way as implicit in Anselm's definition of God. As a result, Anselm's move will be subject to the contextually relevant Aristotelian metaphysical and epistemological considerations.

Exemplary Existence

Philosopher Saul Kripke, perhaps most notable for his contributions in metaphysics, defines the concept of *rigid designators* as "a term that designates the same object in all possible worlds."[3] Here, Anselm's greatest possible being can be understood to designate a unique kind of "object." In order to make the case that this referent is a unique referent or a necessarily existent referent, I now turn to an implicit consideration in Anselm's original argument. One must agree to the idea that existence in reality is better than existence only in the mind in order for Anselm's argument to be persuasive. However, one might make the case that "better" is used in a rather lofty Neoplatonic sense here. While this may be the case for Anselm's specific argument, it is by no means the only possible interpretation of the general principle behind the argument. In this generalized argument, Aquinas' fourth way can be used as a helpful consideration for understanding what Anselm means when he suggests that it is better to exist in reality than only in the mind.

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[3] Saul Kripke, "Identity and Necessity," in *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, second edition, eds. Peter van Inwagen and Dean W. Zimmerman (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 526.

Philosopher and author Matthew Knotts, in his explication of Thomas's fourth way, observes three important distinctions for understanding the argument. First, Thomas is arguing for perfection in the sense of full actualization of a principle that allows for gradation.[4] Second, he notes the convertibility of truth and being, held by Thomas.[5] Finally, observing what he considers the most controversial thesis, he writes, "the maximum in a genus is the cause of all the things in that genus."[6] Knotts makes a case for Aquinas's sense of perfection and his principle of the maximum which allows one to make an empirical case for gradation of existence. In the sense that Thomas understands perfections, an absolute standard is necessary in order to even make sense of how something is better or worse than another thing.[7]

In particular, he suggests that Thomas refers to fire as having heat essentially, and thus, being a special kind of exemplar cause of all things hot.[8] In this sense, an exemplar cause has a kind of perfection essentially which is what

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[4] Matthew W. Knotts, "A Contextual and Philosophical Analysis of Aquinas' Fourth Way," *Archive of the History of Philosophy and Social Thought* 59 (2014): 41.

[5] Ibid., 42.

[6] Ibid., 42.

[7] Ibid., 49.

[8] Ibid., 52.

makes fire the exemplar cause of all things hot.[9] Knotts states, "St Thomas is not talking about the empirical property of heat but rather the intellectual apprehension of the form of heat in a particular thing. And whilst the form of heat and the empirical character of heat are inseparable, they are nonetheless distinct in the intellect."[10] Analogously, from observing that things have, or participate in existence, if one applies the aforementioned principles consistently, then there must be a maximum that is the cause of the genus of existent things. The key distinction here is between the empirical property of a thing and the intellectual apprehension of essential characteristics.

For the purposes of this paper, this analysis of the principle of graded existence, as making the move from better to best possible, as well as being primarily apprehended in the intellect, and yet inseparable from empirical observation, will suffice. A denial of Aristotelian hylomorphism may be one strategy to avoid this conclusion. However, a defense of this position would go beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, I will simply take Aristotle's position for granted in order to provide a reasonable alternative to the Neoplatonic view. Now, the paper will turn to determining how this referent is a necessary referent.

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[9] I believe that one can avoid Thomas's understandable misattribution regarding fire here by simply swapping the term fire with kinetic energy or thermal energy. By doing so, I believe that the spirit of the argument can be essentially maintained.

[10] Matthew W. Knotts, "A Contextual and Philosophical Analysis of Aquinas' Fourth Way," 52.

The Cosmological Identifier

In order to make an empirical case for Anselm's proof that might stand up even in the face of Russell and Quine's scrutiny, I will now consider cosmological arguments and the epistemological impetus behind them. Aristotle writes against the possibility of infinite regressions in *The Metaphysics* saying, "But truly, that there is, at least, some first principle, and that the causes of entities are not infinite*,* either in a progress or a straightforward direction, or according to form is evident."[11] In other words, any causal chain must come to an end at a beginning in order for, temporally speaking, a present to be possible, or causally speaking, an observable effect to be possible. On the matter, Samuel Clarke says, "an infinite succession, therefore, of merely dependent beings without any original independent cause is a series of beings that has neither necessity, nor cause, nor any reason or ground at all of its existence either within itself or from without. That is, it is an express contradiction and impossibility."[12] Epistemologically speaking, this same argument applies when arguing for the possibility of knowledge.

In a minimal sense, the argument seems to hold up to scrutiny and thus, provides an identifier for our rigid designator in Anselm's argument. While some

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[11] Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. John H. McMahon (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991), 43.

[12] Samuel Clarke, "The Cosmological Argument," *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, second edition, eds. Peter van Inwagen and Dean W. Zimmerman (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 599.

may contest that the argument gives no grounds for positing this uncaused first cause to be Anselm's God, the reduction in scope allows the argument to move forward since this specific identification is not necessary for the success of the argument. In other words, anyone who considers the argument against an infinite regress valid will have to posit some entity as the uncaused first cause. Whether this entity is a universe-generating machine, or a magnetic field, etc. is irrelevant if this entity is where the cosmological buck stops. This entity will be, according to the argument in this paper, the unique kind of entity called the greatest possible being.

A Unique Ontic Referent

The Being that Makes Possible Worlds Possible

Now that an entity has been identified, the argument in this paper will proceed to understanding what can be said about this unique entity and how these qualities support Anselm's minimal definition. In his article, "Is the Denial of Existence Ever Contradictory?", Charles Hartshorne makes the interesting observation "being *not conceivably surpassable*, since it implies being the ground of all actuality and all possibility, cannot be thought of as dispensable. It is needed not just for a certain thing but for anything whatever, any world and any absence of a world, indeed any truth or any reality positive or negative."[13] This

unsurpassability is a property of the entity discussed in Anselm's argument and, as long as this idea is conceivable, Hartshorne argues, then the argument is successful. The entire purpose of positing the entity is to account for the possibility of the existence of the universe, or at least the existence of contingent things. As such, this entity becomes a unique ontic referent for existence itself. In other words, one cannot but imagine such an entity in order to understand existence as a concept. In this way, the conceivability of God is supported by the minimal definition used by Anselm that merely requires assent to the conception.

Another consideration for the uniqueness of this entity is illumined particularly with regard to Kripke's definition of a rigid designator. The dynamic between the terms here is similar to that between the terms ontic and ontological. In order for Kripke's definition to be possible at all, the designated entity in this particular argument must be understood as necessarily existent. In this sense, the entity exemplifies existence and makes all the possible worlds where he is referred to by this designation possible. This relation between the terms is what is meant by a unique ontic referent. As a result, the conceptual becomes of primary importance for considering the nature of this particular being or entity. In concert with the Aristotelian metaphysical considerations previously presented, there must be at least one entity identified by this designator.

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[13] Charles Hartshorne, "Is the Denial of Existence Ever Contradictory?" *The Journal of Philosophy* 63, no. 4 (February 1966): 92.

Before moving further with my argument, I will attempt to further explicate the purpose of using Kripke's term in the paper. The purpose of using the rigid designator concept is, to both utilize the term as well as point out that the concept relies on a few fundamental assumptions. First, that there cannot be a conceptual or actual infinite regress. Second, that Kripke's demonstration of the modal rigidity of identity lends credence to our immediate perception of the world in and of itself, and relies on the idea that there is at least one explanatory hypothesis that is necessary. To arrive at this necessarily existent thing, one need merely assent to the existence of at least some contingent things in the universe. Since Kripke's demonstration removes the doubts we may have about our immediate perceptions of the world, we may now conclude that since we do observe contingent things, and, because contingency entails necessity in order to be comprehensible, then there must be a necessary thing that explains the existence of contingent things. This view follows from the assent to the argument against the actual possibility of an infinite regress.

My argument does not make the claim that one must agree to this proposition. In fact, one may circumvent or deny my argument by avoiding any commitment to the view that there cannot be an infinite regress. Rather, what I am putting forth is simply the view that most metaphysical positions already assent to this thesis when they attempt to offer any kind of an explanatory hypothesis for the contingent things in the universe. Thus, any attempt to avoid the conclusion of this

argument must explain the apparent contingency of some things in the universe. Kripke's thesis simply provides an open door to make the case that the cosmological argument identifies a being (or force) that can be offered up as an explanatory ground for the possibility of all actual existent things in all possible worlds. Also, one committed to the view that infinite regresses are possible would likely have to discard Kripke's thesis as well.

Imagine a World Without a World Maker?

Those who oppose the soundness of Anselm's ontological argument often critique what I will refer to from here on out as the conceivability thesis. This thesis is simply the idea that God is that-which-none-greater-can-be-conceived. After one understands the principle of graded existence, the final, and primary portion of the argument is the conceivability thesis. Hartshorne says of Anselm's argument here that he "need mean no more by 'exists in the mind' than 'is not inconceivable or inconsistent.'"[14] Thus, for this portion of the argument, the disagreement remains conceptual and, consequently, the solution will be to determine the conceivability of God according to this definition. However, with the previous considerations in this paper, a different method may be possible that allows for a favorable consideration of the conceivability of the definition that Anselm utilizes regardless of which metaphysical system one adopts.

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[14] Charles Hartshorne, "Is the Denial of Existence Ever Contradictory?" 91.

A Final Synthesis

In the first few sections of this paper, I argued that Saul Kripke's concept of a rigid designator could be used in support of identifying the unique entity posited by metaphysical systems seeking to account for the existence of contingent things in the universe. I also showed the uniqueness of this entity as a requirement for understanding the modal rigidity of identity in the first place. If this application holds up, then one can make the case that most metaphysical accounts actually assent to a minimally conceivable necessary entity. For this argument to work then, one merely needs to agree that there must be some independent ground for the existence of the contingent elements of the universe based on the observation of at least some contingent things. The explanatory hypothesis will have to account for the existence of these things, and, as a result, will be consistent with Anselm's greatest possible being in the sense considered in this paper.

Utilizing Kripke's concept to identify the ground for existence allows the argument to proceed further in spite of the attacks on most metaphysical claims by thinkers like Quine and Russell. Ideally, the fact that other metaphysical views are committed to the existence of this kind of entity makes the case even stronger for the broad applicability of Anselm's unique argument. In other words, the ready assent to a conceptually primary existent thing ought to be enough evidence for the force of the modest argument. In this way, the conversation can move on to identifying the best explanatory hypothesis for this primary existent thing.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that Saul Kripke's concept of a rigid designator could be used in concert with the entity posited by cosmological arguments that identify a unique kind of being consistent with Anselm's greatest possible being. In the process, the principle of graded existence was identified using Aristotelian concepts and definitions that Thomas Aquinas presents in his Fourth Way that provide an alternative to the Neoplatonic interpretation of the principle.

Finally, the argument proceeded by identifying the primacy of the conceivability thesis and showing that the ultimate disagreement regarding the soundness of the argument is conceptual. However, by using Kripke's concept of a rigid designator and his account of modal rigidity, I proposed that by identifying the entity, posited by most metaphysical systems, that accounts for contingency, a case can be made that those who endorse such systems already assent to Anselm's conceivability thesis, and thus, conceive of an equivalent necessarily existent being. Kripke's origin essentialism itself seems to require an explanatory hypothesis, and thus, I believe that this account can both utilize and ground his modal logic. If the argument holds up, then the disagreement is not about whether or not a necessarily existent being is real, but rather what system provides the best explanatory account of that being or thing.

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