On the Impossibility of Successful Ontological Arguments

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I present a novel objection to ontological arguments. The argument concerns ontological arguments in general and has the general form of a reductio ad absurdum. Roughly, it rests on the fact that if a sound ontological argument were available, it would contradict the very nature of God. For God aims at maximizing the development of human good qualities (including thus faith) and if a successful ontological argument were available, faith would become unnecessary. Lastly, I review several objections that can be raised against the present argument.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a novel objection to ontological arguments. I begin by recalling in section 1 some fundamentals of ontological arguments. In section 2, I describe in detail the argument for the impossibility of ontological arguments. Lastly, I review in section 3 several objections that can be pressed against the present argument.

1. Ontological arguments

Ontological arguments are arguments that purport to demonstrate the existence of God from a priori considerations. They are intended to provide a proof of God's existence on the basis of straightforward reasoning from indisputable premises. One characteristic feature of ontological arguments is that they are based on non-empirical grounds. If successful, an ontological argument would constitute a special case of proof of God's existence, exclusively based on a priori considerations. Historically, ontological arguments come in several forms[1], the most ancient and well-known being that of St. Anselm. Descartes in his *Meditations*[2] also provided an ontological argument, whose general structure is definitional. Lastly, it is worth mentioning Gödel's ontological argument, which has attracted recent interest, and modern variations provided by Norman Malcolm[3] and Alvin Plantinga[4].

  For the sake of brevity, I will only sketch Anselm's and Descartes' ontological arguments. Anselm's conceptual ontological argument goes roughly as follows[5]. Begin with the concept of a being than which no greater can be conceived[6]. However, if such a being does not exist, then a being than which no greater can be conceived and which in addition exists, can be conceived of. But this leads to outright contradiction, since the latter is a greater being than the former. Hence, a being than which no greater can be conceived exists.

  Consider, second, Descartes' definitional ontological argument. This latter argument is very concise and runs as follows. We can conceive of a being with every perfections. But existence is also a perfection. Hence, God exists. As Descartes points it out, this argument rests on the fact that existence is of the essence of God.

  On the other hand, several objections have been pressed against ontological arguments. In particular, one major criticism emanated from Kant[7] who famously pointed out that ontological arguments rest on the implicit but false premise that existence is a predicate. In addition, it should be noted that ontological arguments are regarded by most authors as inconclusive. For they seem insufficiently convincing to persuade a non-theist of God's existence.

In what follows, I shall present, to my knowledge, a new objection to ontological arguments. This objection does not concern one specific form of ontological argument, nor does it address one specific premise or inference in ontological arguments. Rather, the present argument aims at showing that ontological arguments in general, given the intrinsic nature of their conclusion, are of an impossible nature. The argument entails that any conclusive ontological arguments would contradict the very nature of God. In short, it leads to the conclusion that no ontological argument can be successful.

2. A general objection to successful ontological arguments

The argument for the impossibility of successful ontological arguments can be sketched informally as follows. Begin, on the one hand, with the consideration that God is a perfect being. Consider, on the other hand, the fact that we humans are imperfect beings. God, as a perfect being, aims at maximizing all human qualities. But if a successful ontological argument were available, then faith would become unnecessary. Hence, we would fail to develop this last good quality. And this would contradict the aforementioned fact that God aims at maximizing the development of human positive qualities.

At this step, it is worth analyzing the argument in more detail:

(1)	God is a perfect being	Premise
(2)	humans are imperfect beings	Premise
(3)	faith is a human good quality	Premise
(4)	a sound ontological argument is a special case of proof of God's existence	Premise
(5)	a perfect being aims at maximizing the development of all human good qualities	From (1)
(6)	God aims at maximizing the development of all human good qualities	From (1) and (5)
(7)	if we had a proof of God's existence	Hypothesis
(8)	then faith would be unnecessary	From (7)
(9)	then we would fail to develop faith	From (8)
(10)	then we would fail to develop one human good quality	From (3) and (9)
(11)	then God would have not maximized the development of human good qualities	From (10)
(12)	then God would not be a perfect being	From (11)
(13)	∴ if we had a proof of God's existence then God would not be a perfect being	From (7) and (12)
(14)	∴ if we had a sound ontological argument then God would not be a perfect being	From (4) and (13)

It should be noted that the above argument has the general form of a reductio ad absurdum. It starts with the hypothesis that we have a proof of God's existence at our disposal and derives a contradiction with the fact that God is a perfect being. An immediate consequence of the argument is that ontological arguments fail. For if a sound ontological argument were available, it would contradict the very fact that God has all of the perfections. Thus, the availability of a successful ontological argument would be in contradiction with the very nature of God.

At this step, it is worth pointing out some distinctive features of the above argument. It should be emphasized, first, that the argument rests on a specific property of our physical world. In effect, our present world allows for the development of faith, since no proof of God's existence is currently available. This constitutes an empirical fact. In addition, it should be pointed out that premise (2) is also based on empirical data. For the evidence that we humans are not perfect beings seems hardly disputable. The current argument appears thus, to the difference of ontological arguments, based on empirical facts. Nevertheless, it should be added that the argument rests only partly on empirical facts, since premises (1) and (4) notably result from a priori considerations.

It should be observed, second, that the argument contrasts the perfect nature of God and the imperfect nature of human beings. In effect, premise (1) states the perfect nature of God and premise

(2) underlines the imperfect nature of human beings. More generally, the argument emphasizes the relationships of God and humankind.

It is also worth defining accurately, third, the scope of the present argument. The current argument is concerned with faith intended as belief in God *qua creator*. This is to distinguish from one alternative interpretation of faith, where faith is narrowly defined as belief in God *qua savior*. Such an account of faith is notably mentioned by Anthony Kenny (1983). It is worth pointing out that this latter account is quite compatible with the above argument, since faith in God qua savior is fully compatible with an a priori proof of God's existence[8]. Thus, the present argument is only concerned with a concept of faith whose object is God *qua creator*.

3. Response to objections

At this stage, it is worth considering several objections that can be pressed against the present argument. Consider, to begin with, an attack against the premises. It should be pointed out preliminarily that premise (1) and premise (2) seem hardly disputable. In effect, premise (1) is a standard and uncontroversial definition. On the other hand, there is a large body of evidence in favor of (2) and few would doubt, I think, that we humans are imperfect beings. In addition, premise (4) which states that a sound ontological argument constitutes a special case of proof of God's existence, seems also hardly debatable.

However, it seems tempting first, to challenge premise (3), namely the fact that faith is one human *good* quality. There are two ways of attacking this premise, and I shall consider them in turn. On the one hand, it could be pointed out that the present argument rests crucially on the notion of faith. But this latter notion is ambiguous, so the objection goes, and this ambiguity renders the argument inconclusive. This objection is designed to weaken the steps in the argument which make use of the concept of faith, namely (3) and also the inference from (7) to (8). To this, I respond that it should be acknowledged that the notion of faith is, in effect, ambiguous. But once one disambiguates this latter concept by distinguishing several interpretations of faith, the argument remains in force, I think. For one concept of faith that corresponds adequately to the required positive quality can be exhibited. In this context, it is worth recalling that William Lad Sessions (1994) notably distinguishes several concepts of faith. He reviews how faith can be interpreted and distinguishes six different notions of faith: personal relationship, belief, attitude, confidence, devotion, and hope. But the present discussion need not be concerned with such a detailed taxonomy. As will become clearer later, it suffices to be more precise about which notion of faith is relevant here. The notion of faith I am concerned with is the one mentioned in Kenneth Kemp (1998). According to Kemp, 'faith is a mean between the extremes of gullibility and excessive skepticism'. It is precisely this last conception of faith that is targeted in the present argument. What is interesting here is that the corresponding notion of faith is defined in relation with two concepts which have an unambiguously pejorative connotation: *gullibility* and *excessive skepticism*. Let us denote them by gullibility$^-$ and excessive skepticism$^-$. Now the corresponding notion of faith can be plugged straightforwardly in the framework of my *Matrices of concepts* (2001). Let us recall that the ensuing theory is based on a structure consisting of 6 canonical concepts: [A^+, A^0, A^-, $\bar{A}^+$, $\bar{A}^0$, $\bar{A}^-$]. In this matrix construction, A^+ and $\bar{A}^+$ are *positive*, A^0 and $\bar{A}^0$ are *neutral*, and A^- and $\bar{A}^-$ are *negative* concepts. Moreover, the relationships of these canonical concepts are the following: A^0 and $\bar{A}^0$ are dual, A^+ and $\bar{A}^-$ but also A^- and $\bar{A}^+$ are opposite, A^+ and $\bar{A}^+$ but also A^- and $\bar{A}^-$ are complementary. The point is that such a class of concepts is logically defined and many common concepts[9] can be put in adequation with the resulting canonical concepts. In the present context, the relevant *matrix* is the following: [faith$^+$, disposition to believe^0, gullibility$^-$, constructive skepticism$^+$, disposition to doubt^0, excessive skepticism$^-$]. To put it more clearly in matrix form:

$$\begin{vmatrix} \text{faith}^+ & \text{constructive skepticism}^+ \\ \text{disposition to believe}^0 & \text{disposition to doubt}^0 \\ \text{gullibility}^- & \text{excessive skepticism}^- \end{vmatrix}$$

What should be borne in mind here is that, according to the theory developed in *Matrices of concepts*, once you have one negative concept, you are able to reconstruct the whole matrix, composed of 6

canonical concepts: $\{A^+, A^0, A^-, \bar{A}^+, \bar{A}^0, \bar{A}^-\}$, that correspond respectively to [faith$^+$, disposition to believe^0, gullibility$^-$, constructive skepticism$^+$, disposition to doubt^0, excessive skepticism$^-$]. In our particular case, when you start with the - unambiguously - negative concept of gullibility$^-$,[10] you can infer the existence of 5 other concepts that pertain to the same matrix. These concepts are logically build and their existence is granted by the logical class to which the concept of gullibility$^-$ belongs. At this point, we are in a position to refine Kemp's definition of faith. For the present framework allows to define faith$^+$ as the positive concept that is the complementary of the opposite concept of gullibility$^-$ (and also the opposite of excessive skepticism$^-$). Thus defined, this latter concept of faith has a wide scope and may concern not only God's existence, but also whatever proposition related to our actual world. But restrictively applied to the existence of God, it is this last concept which is targeted in the present argument. Hence, in the present context, *faith* is assimilated to faith in God qua creator and can be defined as a constructive, positive disposition to believe, whose object is God's existence.

Let us consider, second, another line of objection against premise (3). According to such objection, faith is not a *positive* quality but rather a negative or at the very least, a neutral quality. For it should not be considered rational, so the objection goes, to believe in what is uncertain. According to this line of objection, faith is an attitude that entails a strong belief in the lack of the corresponding proof. Consequently, faith is not a good quality but rather an irrational attitude. Even a strongest form of this objection could be raised against the above argument, on the grounds that faith does not constitute a human positive quality but rather a human defect, or at least a *neutral* attitude.

But this line of objection does not undermine the force of the argument, I think. On the one hand, from a general viewpoint, following the whole attitude of rejecting systematically what is not known with absolute certainty would lead us to unreasonable consequences. For example, such an attitude would constrain us to give up all sort of inductive reasoning, but also to set aside every kind of probabilistic reasoning based on empirical knowledge. Life would be hardly livable, under these circumstances. In addition, the whole idea of limiting oneself to what is known with absolute certainty is notoriously open to the charge of being self-annihilating. For is it known with absolute certainty that one should limit oneself to believing in what is certain? Lastly, it should be added that there is a notion of faith that is not vulnerable to the present objection. In effect, the objection under examination aims at criticizing the attitude of believing *with absolute certainty* that God exists. But a weaker form of faith, that simply maintains that it is very probable that God exists, does not appear vulnerable to this latter objection.

In addition, it is worth mentioning that the view that the just mentioned concept of faith is a positive quality does not entail that those who do not adhere to such conception of faith should be regarded as having an evil quality. Accepting the present argument need not being committed to such intolerant dichotomy. The current argument leaves room in effect to constructive skepticism$^+$, which is also regarded, in the present context, as a positive quality. For in accordance with the above matrix, faith$^+$ and constructive skepticism$^+$ are complementary. And non-faith can be identified with one of the following concepts: {disposition to believe^0, gullibility$^-$, constructive skepticism$^+$, disposition to doubt^0, excessive skepticism$^-$}. Hence, is you don't manifest faith$^+$, you can still consistently express constructive skepticism$^+$.

Let us consider, third, another line of objection. The above argument is for the impossibility of ontological arguments. But its conclusion is also for the impossibility of any proof of God's existence. And this includes not only ontological arguments, but also every sort of proof that would result from empirical evidence. The impossibility of any proof of God's existence seems too strong a claim, could it be objected, for it is conceivable that humankind could face, at some point in time, a proof of God's existence. The above argument, so the objection runs, entails the impossibility of reaching this point. However, this line of objection can be handled as follows. The argument concerns the present state of humankind, and is based on the currently available evidence that faith is not a generalized positive quality among human beings. But suppose that humankind reaches a point in the future where all humans have succeeded in developing (among other good qualities) a strong faith such that God would find that He has successfully permitted the development of human faith. At this point in time, then God could provide an empirical proof of His existence, without being in contradiction with the above argument.

Let us review, fourth, a different line of objection[11] that stems from the classical issue of the relationship between faith and reason. Such a debate is highly relevant to the present issue. There exists in effect different accounts of the relation between faith and reason. Most accounts[12] acknowledge that these two notions are at least partly compatible, but some authors consider that the two notions are incompatible. Faith and reason are fully independent, so the objection goes, and then the above argument fails. According to this line of objection, the inference from (7) to (9) is faulty. Hence, an incompatibilist objector would deny accordingly that if we had a proof of God's existence at our disposal, then we would fail to develop faith. Although such incompatibilist view can be held, it should be pointed out that such a line of objection would have some unpleasant consequences. For suppose that at some point in the future, a large body of evidence of God's existence would become available. Thus, in front of this new evidence, the incompatibilist would be committed to the unpalatable consequence that this last empirical evidence has not the least effect on her initial credence. In front of the evidence, the incompatibilist is committed to indifference. From the incompatibilist's standpoint, the presence or the absence of empirical evidence of God's existence equates to the same. Furthermore, it should be added, that not all incompatibilist accounts are committed to such extreme consequences. For consider, for example, the incompatibilist account developed by Søren Kierkegaard. From Kierkegaard's standpoint, faith demands risk. But a necessary condition to allow for the corresponding *leap* of faith is that no irrefutable evidence of God's existence will be available at the same time. Under these conditions, it appears that Kierkegaard's incompatibilist account is not in contradiction with the present argument.

Lastly, it is worth defining accurately the scope of the current argument. The argument is for the impossibility of a sound ontological argument. It concerns ontological arguments intended in the classical sense, considered as a special case of proof of God's existence. What the argument entails is the impossibility for an ontological argument to provide a definitive proof of God's existence, namely a line of reasoning yielding absolute certainty. But what the argument does not deny is the possibility allowed to ontological argument to simply increase[13] one's faith or to strengthen one's initial belief in God's existence. In conclusion, the above argument leaves room for a form of ontological arguments that would only produce a shift in one's prior subjective probability concerning the existence of God[14].

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