

Charles Hartshorne and the Ontological Argument

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THE ontological argument distinguishes itself from the cosmological and teleological arguments for God's existence because it is *a priori*, while the cosmological and teleological arguments are *a posteriori*. One of the first to formulate the ontological argument was St. Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who lived in the late eleventh century. Anselm's argument rests on the idea that God, by definition, is "that than which none greater can be conceived" and that this definition, when used in a proof created by Anselm, proves God's existence. Another key point in Anselm's argument is that if God exists, he must exist necessarily, symbolized " $p \supset Np$." According to Anselm, who represents a classical understanding of God, it is impossible for God to exist contingently.

Anselm's argument has been criticized and critiqued by many philosophers, one of whom was Immanuel Kant. Kant felt that an ontological proof of the existence of God was impossible (Pojman 5). He called into question the use of being or existence as a predicate, which is used throughout the ontological argument. Kant argued that existence is not a great making property—knowing that something exists does not enhance the thing itself (Pojman 7). A century later, Charles Hartshorne revised the ontological argument and presented a different interpretation of God's mode of existence or of the way God can and needs to be perfect. Hartshorne argued that not only does his version of the argument withstand critiques such as Kant's, it eliminates the fallacy he feels Anselm's original argument creates: rather than prove God's existence, Anselm's argument proves the necessity of God's *non*-existence. I will first outline Anselm's original argument and Kant's critique of that argument. I will then outline Hartshorne's version of

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the argument and explain in detail the following: the central assumption of Hartshorne's proof, that God is possible, Hartshorne's defense of that thesis, and that Hartshorne's defense establishes the validity of his thesis.

St. Anselm's Presentation

Anselm defines God as that than which none greater can be conceived. He claims that when someone hears this, "he surely understands what he hears; and what he understands exists in his understanding" (Pojman 4). However, even though this idea exists in the understanding of an individual, that individual may not necessarily realize that it exists in reality as well. These two things are obviously different, for as Anselm explained, "When a painter, for example, thinks out in advance what he is going to paint, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand that it exists, since he has not yet painted it" (Pojman 4). However, once the artist paints the object, then it exists both in his understanding, and he understands that it exists. Anselm continues his argument by claiming that than which none greater can be conceived cannot only exist in the understanding, "for if it exists only in the understanding, it can be thought to exist in reality as well, which is greater" (Pojman 4). This leads to a contradiction, as shown in the following proof:

1. God =_{df} that than which none greater can be conceived.
2. Some things exist only in the understanding; others exist both in the understanding *and* in reality.
3. God exists in the understanding.
4. All else being equal, that which exists both in the understanding and in reality is greater than that which exists only in the understanding.
5. God exists only in the understanding.
6. It is possible to conceive a God that does not exist only in the understanding.
7. We can conceive of a greater being than God.
(4) (5) (6)
8. We can conceive of a greater being than God and God is that than which none greater can be conceived. (1) (7)
9. God does not exist only in the understanding.
(5) (8)
10. Therefore, he must exist in reality as well.

In addition to the conclusion *that* God exists, according to Anselm it is important to understand *how* he exists. Anselm believed that if God exists, he must exist necessarily, “so that the statement he exists is necessarily true” (Goodwin 3). God’s existence is either necessary or is impossible, or “the statement that God exists is either necessarily true or necessarily false” (4). This argument can be symbolized as follows (4):

“N” for “necessary that”

“q” for “a perfect being exists”

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| 1. | $Nq \vee N\sim q$ | Anselm’s Principle |
| 2. | $\sim N\sim q$ | Assumption |
| 3. | Nq | Inference from 1,2 |
| 4. | $Nq \supset q$ | Modal Axiom |
| 5. | q | Inference from 3,4 |

This argument is central to Hartshorne’s revision of the argument, which I will discuss later in greater detail.

Immanuel Kant’s Objections

According to Kant, the greatest weakness of the ontological argument is its use of existence as a predicate. A judgment has the simple form S is P , S being the subject and P being the predicate. A predicate, Kant argues, is something that enlarges our understanding of the subject. For example, the statement, “every triangle has three angles” is a statement which enlarges our understanding of the thing that is a triangle. However, Kant argues that this understanding came from “judgments and not from things. But the unconditioned necessity of a judgment does not form the absolute necessity of a thing” (Pojman 6–7). The example of the triangle does not tell us that three angles actually exist, but that “upon condition that a triangle exists, three angles must necessarily exist—in it” (Pojman 7). In judgments, if we were to remove the predicate, then the subject remaining by itself would cause a contradiction to occur. It is impossible to think about a triangle that does not have three angles—the exclusion of this predicate makes it self-contradictory. However, to “suppose the non-existence of both triangle and angles” (Pojman 7), would be acceptable because doing so does not yield a self-contradiction. Consider the statements “God exists” and “God is omnipotent.” To deny the omnipotence of God, while assuming his existence, would be contradictory, for God, by definition, is omnipotent.

“But when you say, *God does not exist*, neither omnipotence nor any other predicate is affirmed; they must all disappear with the subject, and in this judgment there cannot exist the least self-contradiction” (Pojman 7).

Consider the following two statements: “cats scratch” and “cats exist.” The former can be interpreted two ways: “if there were cats, they would scratch” and “there are cats and they scratch.” Following this model, the second statement can also be interpreted two ways: “if there were any cats, they would exist” and “there are cats and they exist.” The fallacy is clear: “*Being* is evidently not a real predicate, that is, a conception of something which is added to the conception of some other thing” (Pojman 8). To say that there *is* something does not create a new predicate; it merely affirms the subject with all of its already existing predicates. Kant’s objection to the argument contradicts premise four of the argument given earlier: “All else being equal, that which exists both in the understanding and in reality is greater than that which exists only in the understanding.” Following the interpretation of Anselm and the way his argument is presented, Kant’s objections adequately show its invalidity. Therefore, what is needed is a revision of the original argument: a revision that can withstand Kant’s critique of predicated existence.

Hartshorne’s Revision

The formalized version of Hartshorne’s proof, which he presented in *The Logic of Perfection*, is as follows:

“q” for “ $(\exists x)Px$,” “there is a perfect being, or perfection exists”
 “N” for “it is necessary (logically true) that”

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| 1. | $q \supset Nq$ | “Anselm’s Principle” ¹ |
| 2. | $Nq \vee \sim Nq$ | Excluded Middle |
| 3. | $\sim Nq \supset N\sim Nq$ | Form of Becker’s Postulate ² |
| 4. | $Nq \vee N\sim Nq$ | Inference from (2,3) |
| 5. | $N\sim Nq \supset N\sim q$ | Inference from (1) |
| 6. | $Nq \vee N\sim q$ | Inference (4,5) |
| 7. | $\sim N\sim q$ | Intuitive postulate ³ |
| 8. | Nq | Inference from (6,7) |
| 9. | $Nq \supset q$ | Modal Axiom |
| 10. | q | Inference from (8,9) |

¹Perfection cannot exist contingently.

²Modal status is always necessary.

³Perfection is possible.

The central assumption or thesis to Hartshorne's argument is that God's existence is possible. This assumption is important because the logical underpinning of the argument is that to be possible and to be are the same thing. In defense of his thesis, Hartshorne offers two main points: the inclusion of possibility in the reality of God and that the neoclassical conception of God is able to overcome major difficulties the classical conception, such as that of Anselm, is not able to overcome. In order to see the importance of possibility, first we must understand the differences between classical and neoclassical conceptions. Hartshorne did not disagree with every aspect of Anselm's insights: his "argument against Anselm is that, while his insight into the logical *status* of perfection was correct (i.e., that perfection is either absolutely necessary or utterly impossible), his interpretation of what perfection *means* was inadequate" (Goodwin 52–53). The classical conception of God dictated the following: perfection must imply changelessness, a perfect being must be wholly actual, there is no potentiality in the reality of God, and God is immutable or wholly necessary; there is no distinction between what he is and that he is (53). Hartshorne labeled this as *actus purus*.

Neoclassicism states that perfection does not need to imply changelessness. By introducing possibility into the reality of God, *actus purus* becomes *modal coextensiveness*, or "God covers, with complete adequacy and comprehensiveness the territory of the actual and the territory of the possible" (Goodwin 55). This means that God is both everything that is and everything that could be. Modal coextensiveness also implies a certain distinction in an individual between its abstract identity, the idea of something, and its concrete actual states, how that thing actually is. For example, there is a distinction between the fact that you exist, which encompasses you as an idea or being, and the fact you exist *now* reading this paper, or how it is that you exist in this moment. God has these two distinctions as well; however, the difference between you and God is that "in Him alone it is possible to treat existence as not only different, but different *modally*, from actuality, i.e., so that one is necessary, the other contingent" (Goodwin 56). God can be necessary (his abstract being) and contingent (his concrete states of existence). Under this revision, all the normally attributed properties of God do not apply to his whole being, but only to one aspect; they apply to his abstract being, not to his contingent and changing states and therefore, the classical definitions of God are not denied. I will now show that the neoclassical conception of God is able to overcome the major difficulties that the classical conception is unable to overcome. I will follow a defense for this thesis outlined by George L. Goodwin in his work *The Ontological Argument of Charles Hartshorne*.⁴

⁴I have already cited Goodwin various times in the paper, but the information I have cited is not unique to his book alone. However, the defense he outlines is specific enough for me to explicitly cite his book.

A Formal Ambiguity in the Notion of Perfection

Anselm said God is, by definition, that than which none greater can be conceived or that there is no greater being than God. However, this can be interpreted in two ways. Either God is unsurpassable by all beings, or he is unsurpassable by all beings “save self in future *states*” (Goodwin 58). If interpreted one way, then the “none” in Anselm’s definition refers to all beings, including God himself, and if interpreted the other, then the “none” refers to other beings, except for God himself in the future. This ambiguity allows for a “neglected alternative” in the realm of perfection (58). Goodwin argues that “God is absolutely perfect in all respects” and “God is absolutely perfect in no respects” are contradictory, that only one can be true, but that they can both be false at the same time. Therefore, all the possibilities must be taken into account. The alternative lies between “all” and “none,” or “some.” Goodwin formalized the three possibilities as follows: “God is *in all respects* absolutely perfect and is unsurpassable by self; God is *in some respects* absolutely perfect and unsurpassable, and *in other respects* perfectible or surpassable by self; God is *in no respects* absolutely perfect and in all respects perfectible” (Goodwin 59).

Perfection Requires Potentiality

There is an important distinction between the neoclassical concept, modal coextensiveness, and the classical concept, *actus purus*. The former expresses perfection in terms of becoming, while the latter expresses perfection in terms of being. Under the idea of perfection in terms of becoming, there exist two modes of reality: “concrete becoming and abstract being” (Goodwin 60). In terms of abstract being, perfection will be achieved; it will have the static notion that classic theism believes. However, in terms of concrete becoming, the being will be maximally perfectible only by him.

Actus purus, argues Goodwin, removes the distinction between possibility and actuality. Because God possesses all values completely, what actually is and what could be are the same thing. However, Goodwin offers the following example: If the definition of omniscience is “perfect knowledge,” and a correct knowledge of events which have not yet occurred requires temporality in understanding, “then a perfect knower will know the future . . . as possible and not as actual. God’s knowledge is perfect because he knows all the actuality as actual and all the possibility as possible” (Goodwin 62). This understanding is requisite as we consider the idea of all possible values. There are values, such as green and not-green, that are such that they cannot exist at the same time. A classical concept of God requires the actuality of all values, or that all possibilities are actual

and complete. However, even a simple contradiction between green and not-green shows that this cannot be. Under the classical interpretation, such a contradiction would render the argument not only invalid, it would be necessarily impossible for God to exist under the classic interpretation while considering the notion of perfection. However, in a neoclassical interpretation God has all actual values as actual and all possible values as possible, thus allowing Hartshorne's argument to avoid the contradiction.

Goodwin raises another contradiction within the classical understanding and the idea of infinity and actuality. Goodwin defines actuality as "the decision among competitive alternative possibilities" (63) or that there is always a choice among possibilities in any situation, and there are more possibilities that are not brought about than those that are. If *actus purus* contains the possibilities that are carried out, what of the possibilities that are not carried out? By definition, infinity would take into consideration both those possibilities that are carried out and those that are not carried out. However, it is important to remember that infinite, in terms of *actus purus*, cannot mean all possibilities, for I have already shown above that all possibilities are not housed within *actus purus* (green and not-green). It would seem, according to Goodwin, that infinity is not the totality of actuality, but "the unrestricted disjunction of all possible states of affairs" (63). In the modal coextensiveness of God, infinity is contained within his potentiality, not within his actuality.

The final contradiction stems from a critique much like that of Kant. Goodwin argues that "nor can the divine reality—conceived as wholly actual—be necessary. No actuality . . . can be necessary, and this is the insight which has been misstated in the dogma that 'existence is not a predicate.' . . . God as *actual* cannot be necessary" (64). Classic interpretation, just as Kant argued, cannot carry existence as a predicate because it simply states that God exists. However, modal coextensiveness's existence is always a predicate, because modal coextensiveness says that God is contingent or necessary, which describes *how* he exists, rather than stating *that* he does. Describing *how* something exists adds to the thing itself, and thus Hartshorne's argument is able to avoid another objection that the classical interpretation cannot.

The Existence-Actuality Distinction

Hartshorne once said, speaking of the existence-actuality distinction, that it "is so essential I would have little interest in the ontological proof apart from it" (Goodwin 65). It is vital to Hartshorne because it is the backbone of his potentiality argument—that God's actual state is not the greatest possible state. To approach this subject, Goodwin first considers

the distinction between concrete and abstract. Both *actus purus* and modal coextensiveness share one feature: both are conceptions of perfection that are *a priori* (65). Goodwin asks, “how can a property that is *a priori*, perfection, be distinguished from and yet logically entail an existent being *having* the property? . . . What is the bridge from the *abstract* concept of perfection to the *concrete* actuality of a perfect being?” (66). The idea of humanity, while we understand what is meant, does not necessarily mean that there are humans. Goodwin argues that the classical concept fails to answer this question, while the neoclassical concept is able to give an answer. The distinction between existence and actuality is a distinction between what is perfect and what *has* the property of perfection. In his abstract existence, “God is his perfection . . . but God, in his concrete status, *embodies* perfection” or God *has* the property of perfection and is therefore not identical with perfection (66). Here, what connects the abstract with the concrete (like the bridge above) is the idea that the abstract perfection and concrete instances of perfection must be part of the same individual. God contains both abstract perfection and concrete instances of that perfection. Goodwin argues that the ontological proof does not prove that there is a necessary instance of perfection (as Anselm’s argument purports), but rather that the group of possible instances of perfection *must* have something in it, and that everything in that group *must* belong to one individual.

Goodwin notes another flaw in *actus purus* and dimensions of value. Under the classical concept, God is without any increase; he possesses the maximum of all values. However, there are some values that do not have a limit. Take for example knowledge. When compared to “the richness and variety . . . of its objects, (knowledge) can have no maximal form” (71). Why is this? Because the nature of having a richness of knowledge is that there will always be something *new* to experience, “*new* actualities for a perfect knower to know” (Goodwin 71). However, knowledge, understood as an error-free state of knowing, can have a maximum limit. The distinction is between concrete values, a knowledge *of* x, and an abstract value, or having all knowledge. Rather than God’s perfection being the realization of maximum values, the question is posed, “must we not proceed more cautiously and define ‘perfection’ rather as the categorically ultimate form of all attributes that admit such form and the categorically superior form of all attributes that do not admit an ultimate form?” (Goodwin 72).

Conclusion

The idea of proving the existence of God *a priori* has appealed to philosophical theologians for centuries. In his presentation of the ontological

argument, Anselm felt that he had achieved that very goal. However, important objections raised by later philosophers, such as Kant, clearly showed the invalidity of the argument as Anselm had presented it. However, in his revision of the argument, Hartshorne strengthened the argument not only from critiques like those of Kant (namely that existence is not a predicate), but also from the fallacies that occurred within the original argument itself. Hartshorne's modal coextensiveness, which contained abstract and concrete perfection, solved the problems faced by Anselm's original argument, such as those of perfection and infinity. Lastly, the distinction between concrete and abstract proved Hartshorne's original thesis: to be possible and to be are indeed the same thing.

Works Cited

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