12 Begging the Question

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Immanuel Kant coined the term *der ontologische Beweis* as a name for an argument that had been invented by Descartes and had later been refined by Leibniz and the members of the Wolff–Baumgarten school. At some point in the nineteenth century, the term began also to be applied to a rather different argument that had been devised by St Anselm over five hundred years before Descartes wrote his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Apparently the word *Beweis* was not regarded by Kant (and has not been regarded by later philosophers writing in German) as an 'achievement term'; for Kant, there could be a *Beweis* that was incorrect or a failure, the Cartesio-Leibnizian argument of course being a case in point. But, although the usual English translation of *Beweis* is 'proof', Anglophone philosophers (none of whom, perhaps, believes that the Anselmian or the Cartesian arguments demonstrate their conclusions) are very strongly inclined to hear 'proof' as an achievement term, and, for that reason, generally prefer 'ontological argument' to 'ontological proof'. The term 'ontological argument' has, for the last half-century or so, also been applied to various arguments that are significantly different from both those arguments, certain modal arguments that are due largely to the work of Charles Hartshorne[1] and Alvin Plantinga.[2] There is, therefore, no one argument that can be called *the* ontological argument, and it has become common to speak of 'ontological arguments'. Even this term, however, is suspect, for it is not obvious that the arguments that are generally collectively referred to as 'ontological arguments' have enough in common to justify a taxonomy of argument that includes just them and excludes all other arguments for the existence of God.

For the purposes of this chapter, however, it will not be necessary to decide whether all the arguments that have been called 'ontological arguments'

[1] See Hartshorne (1962); especially §6 ('The Irreducibly Modal Structure of the Argument') in ch. 2 ('Ten Ontological or Modal Proofs for God's Existence') at pp. 49–57.

[2] See Plantinga (1974: ch. 10).

should or should not be grouped together under one name. It will be assumed in this chapter that all 'ontological arguments' other than the modal arguments of Hartshorne and Plantinga are irremediably flawed[3] and that there is therefore no reason to determine whether they beg the question: if they beg the question, that is, so to speak, the least of their worries. The topic of this chapter is therefore the question whether any of or all the modal arguments beg the question.

But this description of our topic *raises*[4] the question: What is it to beg the question? I must confess that I am unable to give a satisfactory account of what it is for an argument to beg the question. (Some of my own philosophical arguments have been accused of something very like 'begging the question' – I concede the phrase was not used – simply because they were formally valid arguments for a conclusion the accusers thought was false. Their reasoning seems to have been something like this: if the conclusion of an argument can be formally deduced from its premises, then that conclusion is, as one might put it, logically contained in the premises – and thus one who affirms those premises is assuming that the conclusion is true. As R. M. Chisholm once remarked when confronted with a similar criticism, 'I stand accused of the fallacy of affirming the antecedent.') I will, however, propose a *sufficient* condition for begging the question – that is, a condition such that if an argument satisfies that condition it can reasonably be said to beg the question.

> If it would be impossible to know whether one or more of the premises of a logically valid argument was true without first (or at least simultaneously) knowing whether its conclusion was true, then that argument begs the question.

The main conclusion of this chapter will be that all modal ontological arguments have this feature.[5]

I turn now to the various modal ontological arguments.

1 Formulation

In the sequel, I will take for granted the concepts of a possible world, and various allied concepts, such as the actuality and non-actuality (of worlds), the

[3] My arguments for this contention can be found in part 1 ('The Meinongian Argument') and part 2 ('The Conceptual Argument') of van Inwagen (2012).

[4] Most readers of this chapter will be excruciatingly aware of the deplorable recent tendency among non-philosophers to use 'beg the question' to mean 'raise the question'.

[5] But see note 9.

existence of an object in a world, the truth of a proposition in a world, and one world's being 'accessible from' or 'possible in relation to' another world.

As there are versions of the ontological argument, there are versions of versions of the ontological argument. At any rate, there is more than one version of the modal argument. Here is a version I think is as clear and elegant as any.

A perfect being, let us say, is a being that possesses all perfections essentially. (That is to say, a being is perfect in a possible world w if and only if it possesses all perfections in every world accessible from w.) Necessary existence, moreover, is a perfection. (A being possesses necessary existence in a world w if and only if it exists in every world accessible from w.) Suppose that a perfect being (so defined) is possible. Suppose, that is, that there is a perfect being in some world w accessible from the actual world (α). But then some being x that exists in α is a perfect being in w – since there is a perfect being (and hence a necessarily existent being) in w, w is accessible from α, and the accessibility relation is symmetrical. Might x exist only contingently in α? No, for in that case there is some world w' accessible from α in which x does not exist; and w' is accessible from w, since the accessibility relation is transitive.

But is x a perfect being in α? Yes, for consider any given perfection – say, wisdom. The being x is essentially wise in w, and hence is wise in α, since α is accessible from w. But might x be only accidentally wise in α? No, for in that case there is a world w'', accessible from α, in which x exists but is not wise. But, owing to the transitivity of the accessibility relation, w'' is accessible from w. And the point is perfectly general: given the symmetry and transitivity of the accessibility relation, x will have a property essentially in α if it has it essentially in any world accessible from α. There therefore actually exists a being that has all perfections essentially – that is to say, there actually exists a perfect being. (Might someone protest that we have shown that the being x possesses necessary existence in α but have not shown that x possesses necessary existence *essentially* in α? Well, if the accessibility relation is transitive, then anything that is necessarily existent is essentially necessarily existent. But it is not necessary to include a demonstration of that thesis in our argument, for we know that x possesses all perfections essentially in w, and hence is essentially necessarily existent in w; it therefore follows from what we have shown that x is essentially necessarily existent in α.)

This argument has only two premises: that necessary existence is a perfection (or that contingent existence is incompatible with perfection), and that a perfect being is possible. One might say that it also had the premise that the accessibility relation was an equivalence relation, but if that is a premise of the argument, it can be eliminated by reformulating the argument in terms not of quantification over possible worlds but as what one might call an explicitly modal argument, that is an argument containing modal sentential operators:

$\Box\, \forall x$ (x is a perfect being $\rightarrow \Box\, (\exists y\ y = x)$)[6]

$\Diamond\, \exists x\ x$ is a perfect being,
hence, $\exists x\ x$ is a perfect being.

But, although this argument does not require the premise that the accessibility relation is an equivalence relation (for it does not mention possible worlds at all), it is not (as was the above argument) valid in ordinary quantifier logic. It is valid only in S5, the strongest system of *modal* logic.

There are 'explicitly modal' versions of the ontological argument that are valid in weaker modal systems than S5, but those arguments require additional premises. Consider, for example, the first of Hartshorne's modal arguments.[7] Let 'G' represent the conclusion of the argument – 'A perfect being exists,' 'God exists,' however you want to state Hartshorne's conclusion. This argument had two premises:

$\mathrm{G} \prec \Box\, \mathrm{G}$

$\Diamond\, \mathrm{G}$

(Here '$\prec$' represents strict implication: $p \prec q =_{df} \Box\, (p \rightarrow q)$.) Hartshorne appealed to S5 in his deduction of G from these two premises, but it was soon pointed out that the deduction was valid in the weaker system B. (The validity of B is, loosely speaking, equivalent to the statement that the accessibility relation is symmetrical; it does not require that it be transitive.) Hartshorne,

[6] This formula contains a sub-formula that consists of the necessity sign followed by a sentence containing a free variable. We understand, e.g., '$\Box\ x$ is wise' as follows: an object satisfies this sentence in a world w just in the case that that object exists in all worlds accessible from w and is wise in all those worlds. That is to say, an object satisfies this sentence if and only if it is *necessarily* wise; an object that was *essentially* wise – wise in every world in which it existed – would not satisfy this sentence if there were worlds in which it did not exist. Thus, '$\Box\ \exists y\ y = x$' expresses necessary existence and not the trivial property of essential existence – a property that, of necessity, everything has. (Of *course* existence is an essential property of Socrates: he couldn't exist without having it.)

[7] See Hartshorne (1962: ch. 2.

moreover, later offered an explicitly modal ontological argument that required almost no 'modal logic' at all:

1	. $\Box G \vee \Box \sim G$	*premise*
2	. $\Diamond G$	*premise*
3	. $\sim \Box \sim G$	2
4	. $\Box G$	1, 3 *disjunctive syllogism*
5	. G	4

This argument requires the validity only of two trivial modal inference rules ('$\Diamond p \mid\!— \sim \Box \sim p$' and '$\Box p \mid\!— p$' – 'trivial' in the sense that they must be valid in every modal system in which the sentential operators represent possibility and necessity in any intuitive sense).[8] One could regard the first premise of each of Hartshorne's arguments as substitutes for an appeal to the strong modal system S5. At any rate, both premises follow from the assumption that the accessibility relation is both symmetrical and transitive (if we read 'G' as 'There is a necessarily existent being that has all perfections essentially').

2 Epistemic Neutrality

The modal ontological argument – in any of its versions, for they all have a 'possibility' premise, a premise of the same sort as 'It it possible for there to be a necessarily existent being that has all perfections essentially'[9] – suffers from only one defect: there seems to be no *a priori* reason, or none accessible to the human intellect (perhaps none accessible to any finite intellect) to think that it is possible for there to be a necessarily existent being that has all perfections essentially. I myself think that this premise of the argument is true – but only because I think that there in fact *is* a necessarily existent being who has all perfections essentially. And my reasons for thinking that are by no means *a priori*; they depend (so *I* suppose) on what that being has revealed about

8 A qualification: if we think of deontic logic as a kind of modal logic, and if we think of the box as representing 'moral necessity', that is, being 'non-negotiably' demanded by morality, then it is sad but true that the second principle fails. But obviously the necessity involved in modal ontological arguments is not moral necessity.

9 Lowe (2012) presents an argument that can, without misuse of either term, be called a 'modal ontological' argument, and this argument does not have a 'possibility premise'. Lowe's argument, however, in no way resembles the arguments of Hartshorne and Plantinga, and it is therefore not an argument of the sort that the phrase 'modal ontological argument' would suggest to most philosophers. For that reason, I will not include a discussion of Lowe's argument in this chapter.

himself to humanity. And I do not mean simply that no *conclusive* reason for thinking that such a being is possible can be supplied by *a priori* human reasoning. I mean that human reason is impotent to discover by *a priori* reasoning any consideration whatever that should cause a human reasoner to raise whatever prior probability he or she may assign to the possibility of such a being.

And I would go further. I would say that, divine revelation apart, a human being should either assign a prior probability of 0.5 to the proposition that it is possible for there to be a necessarily existent being who possesses all perfections essentially, or else refuse to assign it any probability at all. (Which of these would be the right thing to do depends on the resolution of some thorny questions in the philosophy of probability.)

My conviction that this is so rests in part on my conviction that no one has presented any cogent argument *a priori* for the conclusion that we ought to assign some probability lower than 0.5 to that proposition, a conviction that I will not defend here – since a defence could only take the form of successive examinations of each of the many arguments that have been offered for that conclusion. And, of course, it rests on my conviction that the arguments that have been offered (by Leibniz and Gödel, among others) for the conclusion that a perfect being is possible lend no support whatever to their conclusions. I will not defend this conviction either, since an adequate examination of these arguments is not possible within the scope of this paper (and since I have done so elsewhere).[10]

I conclude that whatever value the modal ontological argument may have, whatever philosophical rewards may attend a careful study of the argument, this value and these rewards are not epistemological: they will not provide the student of the argument with any sort of *reason for believing* that a perfect being exists. If a philosopher's sole interest in the modal ontological argument is in that sense epistemological, he or she will find it of no more interest than the following argument (formally identical with Hartshorne's second argument) for the truth of Goldbach's Conjecture (that every even number greater than 2 is equal to the sum of two primes – abbreviate this statement as 'G'):

1	. $\Box G \vee \Box \sim G$	*premise*
2	. $\Diamond G$	*premise*
3	. $\sim \Box \sim G$	2
4	. $\Box G$	1, 3
5	. G	4

[10] See Van Inwagen (2007).

This argument is indisputably valid and its first premise is indisputably true. It is equally indisputable, however, that this argument is not only not a proof of Goldbach's Conjecture but provides no reason whatever for thinking that Goldbach's Conjecture is true. And the reason for this can be simply stated: one could have no reason for thinking that Goldbach's Conjecture was possibly true (true in some possible world accessible from the actual world) unless that reason were a reason for thinking that Goldbach's Conjecture was true simpliciter (true in the actual world).[11] The point that this example illustrates may be generalized.

Let us say that a proposition is *epistemically neutral* (for a certain person or a certain population at a certain time) if the epistemic status of that proposition and the epistemic status of its denial (with respect to that person or population at that time) are identical. If an example of an epistemically neutral proposition (epistemically neutral for us, now) is wanted, I offer the following: the proposition that at the present moment the number of stars in the Milky Way galaxy with a mass greater than that of our sun is even.

And let us say that a proposition is *non-contingent* if either that proposition or its denial is a necessary truth.

I contend that the 'Goldbach' example is a special case of and illustrates the following general principle:

> If a proposition *p* is non-contingent, and is known to be non-contingent by a certain person or certain population at a certain time, and if *p* is epistemically neutral for that person or population at that time, then the proposition that *p* is possibly true is also epistemically neutral for that person or population at that time.

(This principle would obviously not be true if its application were not restricted to non-contingent propositions: consider the proposition that I offered as an example of a proposition that is epistemically neutral for us; I take it to be obvious that we are warranted or perfectly justified – insert your favourite term of epistemic commendation here – in believing that it is metaphysically possible that at the present moment the number of stars in the Milky Way galaxy with a mass greater than that of our sun is even.)

[11] Suppose it could be shown (perhaps by brute-force computation) that *if* there is a counterexample to Goldbach's Conjecture, it is greater than 10^{100}. That, to my mind, would be a reason, albeit not a decisive reason, for thinking that Goldbach's conjecture was true. And it would of course be a (non-decisive) reason for thinking that Goldbach's Conjecture was possibly true.

Any instance of this principle I can think of is obviously true. Here is an example that is, if anything, even more obviously true than the 'Goldbach's Conjecture' instance. Consider some 'vast' or 'enormous' natural number – say Skewes' Number, at one time said to have been the largest finite number that had figured essentially in any important mathematical result. Or, rather, take the following powers-of-10 approximation of that number: 10 exp (10 exp (10^{34})).[12] And consider the proposition that the number of primes smaller than that number is even. It is evident that this proposition is non-contingent, and I believe it to be epistemically neutral for us. (It is certain that its truth-value could not be established by an enumeration of the primes smaller than 10 exp (10 exp (10^{34})) in any reasonable amount of time. A computer the size of the Hubble universe and capable of executing a trillion operations per second that had been engaged in the task of counting the primes smaller than 10 exp (10 exp (10^{34})) for a trillion years would have counted only a minuscule portion of them. This would be true even if information could be transferred from one site in the computer to any other instantaneously.) But it is certainly evident that there could not be a reason for thinking that this proposition was possibly true that was not a reason for thinking it true.

If the principle I have proposed is true, then – since the conclusion of any version of the modal ontological must be a non-contingent proposition, and since one of the premises of that argument must be the proposition that its conclusion is possibly true – no version of the modal ontological argument can serve as a vehicle from which one can pass from epistemic neutrality as regards its conclusion to justification or warrant. Nor can it serve even as a vehicle that can transport its passengers from epistemic neutrality to some status that lies between epistemic neutrality and warrant.

I do not claim to have shown that the principle is correct. But I would propose that proponents of the thesis that the modal ontological argument might have some epistemic value do at least this much: provide an example (an example that is at least somewhat plausible; I do not demand that it be indisputable) of a non-contingent proposition that is epistemically neutral for some population and is such that the proposition that it, the chosen proposition, is possibly true is not epistemically neutral for that population.

[12] For the mathematically sensitive: in using the word 'approximation' I am speaking very loosely. Skewes' Number is *e* exp (*e* exp (e^{79})), where *e* is an irrational number in the vicinity of 2.71828. The powers-of-10 number given in the text is the number closest to Skewes' Number that can be expressed in powers-of-10 notation using only integral exponents. It is greater than Skewes' Number; no doubt its ratio to Skewes' Number is a very large number indeed.

In my view, the discovery of a proposition with those properties would be an important contribution to the study of the modal ontological argument.

3 Rational Permissibility

Alvin Plantinga has contended that the modal ontological argument does have epistemic value.[13] He concedes that it cannot, as I have put it, 'serve as a vehicle from which one can pass from epistemic neutrality as regards its conclusion to warrant'. He ascribes, rather, a different sort of epistemic value to it: that it can be used to show that it is not irrational to accept its conclusion. His argument is essentially this: one can rationally believe, one can believe without violating any canon of reason, that a perfect being possibly exists or that the concept 'perfect being' is not an impossible concept. The modal ontological argument shows that if it is possible for a perfect being to exist, then a perfect being does exist. A theist (a person who believes in the existence of a perfect being) may therefore defend the rationality of his or her allegiance to theism by the following reasoning: 'It is not irrational for me to believe that it is possible for a perfect being to exist; I am aware that it follows logically from the proposition that it is possible for a perfect being to exist that a perfect being does exist; my belief that a perfect being exists is therefore not irrational.'

The plausibility of this hypothetical theist's reasoning obviously depends on the following principle, or something very like it: If it can be rational to believe that *p*, and if it is demonstrable that *q* follows logically from *p*, then it can be rational to believe that *q*. Let us call this the Rationality Principle (RP). We shall presently examine RP carefully, but let us first ask why Plantinga holds that it can be rational to believe that a perfect being is possible.

Plantinga points out that there are lots of respectable, widely held philosophical positions for which there is no argument that is accepted by all (or even by most) competent philosophers. (One might cite Meinong's thesis that properties can be truly ascribed to objects that have no sort of being whatever, the thesis that there cannot be a private language, and the thesis that the rightness or wrongness of an act is solely a function of its consequences.) That a perfect being is possible is, Plantinga contends, one of these respectable, widely held philosophical positions. Many philosophers accept it, and various important philosophers have attempted to show that it is false – Sartre, for example ('Such a being would be an impossible amalgam

[13] See Plantinga (1974: 220–1).

of *être-pour-soi* and *être-en-soi* ') and J. N. Findlay ('A perfect being must be necessarily existent, and if there is a necessarily existent being, there are necessarily true existential propositions, which is impossible'). And, Plantinga further contends, any respectable, widely held philosophical position is one that it can be rational for a philosopher to hold, even if there is no argument for that position that is accepted by all or most competent philosophers. His argument is, in the final analysis, *ad homines*: philosophers had *better* believe this; philosophers who do not – and who do not wish to affirm theses that they themselves say cannot be rationally affirmed – will find themselves 'with a pretty slim and pretty dull philosophy' (Plantinga (1974: 221).

Let us not dispute this conclusion; let us stipulate that it can be rational to believe that a perfect being is possible.[14] Does it follow that (given the validity of the modal argument) it can be rational to believe that there is a perfect being? The right answer to this question obviously depends on whether RP is true. And it would seem that it is not – not if it is true that any respectable philosophical position is a position that it can be rational to hold. A simple example shows this.

That there are universals is obviously a respectable, widely held philosophical position. Therefore, if Plantinga is right, it can be rational to believe that there are universals. Let us suppose that this possibility is realized: a certain philosopher, Alice, does believe that there are universals and this belief of hers is rational. Now suppose that someone presents Alice with an indisputably sound demonstration of both these propositions: every universal occupies some region of space; no universal occupies any region of space (note that these two propositions are not logical contradictories, and that there is therefore no logical barrier to there being a demonstration of each). Would it then be reasonable for Alice to believe that something both occupies some region of space and does not occupy any region of space? Obviously not: no one can rationally believe an obvious and straightforward contradiction. It is obvious that what Alice ought to do, in the situation in which she finds herself, is to withdraw her assent to 'There are universals' – and in fact to assent to 'There are no universals.' And we therefore have a counterexample to RP: it is true that it can be rational to believe that there are universals (this is shown by example: Alice rationally believed that there were universals

[14] The thesis, however, is certainly highly disputable. Why is it rational to believe that it is true in some possible world that there is a perfect being, but not (as presumably it is not) rational to believe that it is true in some possible world that the number of primes smaller than Skewes' Number is even?

before she was aware of the demonstration that their existence implied a contradiction); it is demonstrable that the existence of universals implies a certain contradiction; it cannot be rational to believe that contradiction. If someone is unhappy with this example on the pedantic ground that it is not in fact possible to demonstrate both the proposition that each universal occupies some region of space and the proposition that no universal occupies any region of space, I offer a second example. Joaquima, who lives in the Ibizan village of Santa Eulàlia, believes that in her village there lives an adult male barber who shaves all and only the adult males living in Santa Eulàlia who do not shave themselves. It is rational for her to believe this, because it was told to her by her uncle Filip, renowned for his knowledge of all matters pertaining to Ibiza. It is then demonstrated to her that her belief logically implies that some adult male who lives in Santa Eulàlia both shaves himself and does not shave himself. It does not follow that this demonstration renders it rational for her to believe that some adult male who lives in Santa Eulàlia both shaves himself and does not shave himself.

The general lesson of these counterexamples to RP is this: It may (a) be true that someone can rationally believe that *p*, and (b) demonstrable that *p* entails *q*, and (c) *false* that anyone can rationally believe that *q* – because no one can rationally believe that *q* and one can rationally believe that *p* only if one is unaware that it is demonstrable that *p* entails *q*. For all Plantinga has said therefore, it may be that, although it can be rational to believe that a perfect being is possible and demonstrable that the possibility of a perfect being entails the existence of a perfect being, it cannot be rational to believe in the existence of a perfect being – since it cannot be rational to believe in the existence of a perfect being and it can be rational for one to believe that a perfect being is possible only if one is unaware that the possibility of a perfect being entails the existence of a perfect being.

Plantinga's argument is therefore unconvincing. But even if the argument were convincing, even if it were wholly unobjectionable, it is not easy to see why it would be *necessary*.[15] If one believes, as Plantinga does, that any respectable, widely held philosophical position is one that it can be rational to hold, why should one not apply this thesis 'directly' to 'A perfect being exists'? Why need one bother with an argument that appeals to 'A perfect

[15] The point that follows would apply to any elaboration of Plantinga's argument that was not subject to my criticism of the original argument. An example of such an elaboration: Replace RP with 'If it can be rational to believe that *p*, and if it is demonstrable that *q* follows logically from *p*, and if there is no known demonstration that it is irrational to believe that *q*, then it can be rational to believe that *q*. '

being is possible' and the modal argument and RP? 'A perfect being exists,' after all, is a thesis that has been affirmed by many respectable philosophers. If, moreover, one does for some reason think that an argument for the conclusion that it can be reasonable to believe that a perfect being exists that appeals to RP is preferable to one that does not, one will find it easy to construct 'RP' arguments that appeal to entailments that can be demonstrated by reasoning much simpler than the reasoning contained in the modal argument. For example: 'It can be rational to believe that some material thing has been created by a perfect being; "Some material thing has been created by a perfect being" demonstrably entails "There is a perfect being"; therefore, it can be rational to believe that there is a perfect being.'