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Book Review

Bencivenga, Ermanno. *Logic and Other Nonsense: The Case of Anselm and His God*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993.

Some of this book consists of an evaluation of St. Anselm's comments on matters which do not pertain directly to the cogency of Anselm's various versions of the ontological argument. Readers who have read little of Anselm, which does not have a direct bearing on the *Proslogion* and *Responsio* arguments, may benefit from some of the author's exploration of the rest of Anselm.

Still, I think that there are many passages, especially on the ontological argument *per se* which are lacking in clarity. In what follows, I shall not undertake to defend Anselm, but rather to point out defects in some of the author's comments on him.

1 On page 15 we find the following quote from Anselm:

> …when it is said "[that] than which nothing greater can be thought" beyond doubt what is heard can be thought and understood, even if that thing cannot be thought or understood, than which a greater cannot be thought.

On page 16, the author (charitably) interprets Anselm as here employing a *via negativa* ("a purely negative route" as the author calls it). And he defends *via negativas* as follows:

> … you don't really know a great deal concerning the nature of something if you know only what it is not. But one need not be bothered by this limitation: what is in question is not an insight into God's nature but the providing of a rational ground for the truth of a proposition. And such an operation, we know, can often be completed by taking a purely negative route—witness *reductio* arguments.

Later, on page 114, the author interprets one of Anselm's versions of the ontological argument as a *reductio*.

> [The argument] is a *reductio* argument… I will take it that the argument succeeds if it (at least) establishes that God exists, without making Him any less incomprehensible or inconceivable than He was before the argument.

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These two passages, taken together, suggest that the author thinks that *reductios* are especially well suited to establish the existence of inconceivable things. Let us grant that statements about inconceivable things are not *ipso facto* meaningless, at least when they are formulated in terms of *via negativas*. (But aren't they? "It is neither a table nor a duck" appears to be meaningful, but this may be only because we think that it can be expanded into "The speaker is conceiving of something which is neither a table nor a duck.") Still, the following *non-reductio* is surely just as effective in establishing the existence of an unconceived (and, perhaps, inconceivable) thing.

(1) *X* is neither a table nor a duck.

So

(3) *X* is a non-duck.

Will the author argue here that at least *reductios* are a legitimate species of argument and that they typically involve *via negativas*, so that it is reasonable to suppose that the latter are acceptable? I submit that the following is a paradigm case of a *reductio*. Assume that

(1) Socrates is not mortal.

(2) Socrates is a man, and all men are mortal.

So

(3) Socrates is both mortal and not mortal.

But

(4) (3) is (necessarily) false and (2) is true.

Hence

(1) is false.

Premise (2) of this argument is not just an assertion of what Socrates is not, i.e., it does not take a "purely negative route" with respect to Socrates. So here we have one *reductio* which cannot be adduced by way of defending *via negativas*. Hence, even if there are some *reductios* which can be formulated with *via negativa*-type premises, it is far from clear that there is something special about *reductio* arguments which makes them particularly suited to expressing *via negativas*, and, hence, the legitimacy of the former does not support the claim that the latter are acceptable.

2 Astoundingly, the author's only attempt at giving a precise formulation of any version of Anselm's *Proslogion* and *Responsio* arguments occurs in an Appendix. (It is rather as if the author had written a book on, say, logic and Gödel's theorem, and discussed the proof of that theorem only in an Appendix.)

On page 114, the author asks us to consider the following interpretation:

(1) One can think of *X* [that, than which a greater cannot be thought].
(2) Therefore, there is a thinkable world *w* where *X* exists.
(3) Now suppose that *X* does not exist in the real world.
(4) Then, in *w*, something greater than *X* [that, than which a greater cannot be thought] can be thought.

(5) But this is a logical falsehood.

(Again, the author takes this to be a *reductio*, which is supposed to show that (3) is false.)

The author does not attempt to explain why we should think that it follows from the fact that *X* [that, than which nothing greater can be thought] does not exist in the actual world that if there is a non-actual world, *w*, in which *X* exists, then in *w* something greater than *X* can thought. But set that aside. The author's criticisms of the envisaged interpretation leave much to be desired.

He asks, "What is the logical falsehood to which (5) refers?" and answers as follows:

(6) That, than which a greater cannot be thought, is such that a greater than it can be thought.

And he adds:

(6) is a logical falsehood if and only if the following is a logical truth:

(7) That, than which a greater cannot be thought, is such that a greater than it cannot be thought.

The author then goes on to say:

(7) is an instance of the principle of Self-Predication;

(8) The *P* is (a) *P*, and there are all sorts of problems with (8) in general — problems with round squares which are not round, and the like. However (8) seems undeniably true when the *P* exists, or, to put it otherwise, the Restricted Principle of Self-Predication;

(9) If the *P* exists, then the *P* is (a) *P* seems to be a logical truth.

Now there are, according to the author, two contrasting approaches to (8): a) "transcendental realism," the view that (8) reduces to (9) and b) "transcendental idealism, " (the author's position) which has it that (8) does not reduce to (9). In more detail, according to the author, the realist holds this about (10), the *P* is a *Q*:

> On the surface of it, this statement is a predication …it predicates the property *Q* of the object designated by "the *P*." But this can only happen if there is an object designated by "the *P*," that is (for the realist) if the *P* exists. If there exists no such thing as the *P*, then you can't say anything about it, and what appears to be a predication is not; the surface grammar of (10) must be delusive …Therefore, within transcendental realism, (8) as a logical principle, not as a delusive grammatical appearance—can only mean (9), and since (9) is hardly questionable, (8)'s credentials will be just as strong.

On the other hand, for the transcendental idealist:

> …a statement of the form (10) is perfectly legitimate whether or not the P exists; for him it is not true, as Russell …put it, that a name has got to name something or it is not a name. A name must have a certain role in language, and in the end some of the expressions that have this role will be found to name existent objects and some will not. So, for the transcendental idealist, (8) does not mean (9), but this also entails that for him (8) is not an attractive principle at all; a brief reflection on round squares that are not round and the like will convince him that there are no good reasons to believe in its truth.

Let me comment on this argument. It is not at all clear what the author means by "if there is no such thing as the *P* …the surface grammar of (10) must be delusive." But since he mentions Russell on "names" that do not name, it is reasonable to think that, if the author has anything precise in mind, he has in mind Russell's theory of descriptions, i.e., that he has in mind something like the thesis that "The present King of France is bald" means "There exists one and only one individual of whom the predicate 'a present king of France' is true, and that individual is bald."

Now let us hearken back to (7) —"that, than which a greater cannot be thought, is such that a greater than it cannot be thought." Given that he accepts Russell's theory of descriptions, the transcendental realist will most assuredly not suppose that (7) has any vestige of relevance to proving the existence of a being than which a greater cannot be thought, if in fact he thinks that no such being exists. For he will hold that what (7) should be construed as asserting is that there exists one and only one individual which is such that a greater than it cannot be thought, and a greater than that individual cannot be thought. The Russellian realist, who holds that there is no such individual, will simply maintain that the conjunction is false, since its first conjuct is false.

My point is, that given one obvious way of making sense of "the surface grammar of (10) must be delusive …you must in fact be saying something else," the author's transcendental realist will no more accept (7) than will the author's transcendental idealist. And if there is some other construal of the contemplated quote on which a rational person might be tempted to accept (7), even if she believed that there is no individual than which a greater cannot be thought, the author needed to tell us what it is. (Did he have Chomsky in mind? How does Chomsky help?) In short, careful attention to what the author is trying to say here justifies the conclusion that, whether or not it is sound and fury signifying nothing, it signifies, at the least, very little.

It is of note that if the realist agreed with, say, Strawson, then he would hold that, if the individual than which nothing greater can be thought does not exist, (7) is neither true nor false. But, as things stand, though the author clearly thinks that (7) is defective, we are left without a clue as to precisely what the author thinks is wrong with it, and more importantly, why he thinks that there is a species of reputable philosophers who would accept it.

3 The author has a second criticism of this interpretation of Anselm. On page 120, he says of the transcendental idealist that

> …to be an object for him is to be the object-of-an-experience, and the normal case is when such an (intentional) object cannot be "detached" from the experience and considered—and manipulated—independently of it. At times, of course, such detaching is possible; for example, if I become convinced that the present experience of seeing a computer is internally consistent and well connected with the rest of (my) experiences, I might detach its object (the computer) and talk about it *simpliciter*. In general, this operation requires a lot of work, and if the work is not done the object will remain buried within its experience. But it is precisely this kind of work that the ontological argument is supposed to do. If the argument is successful, we will have proved that God exists and we will be able to detach him from our experience of, for example, thinking of

> him. Therefore, it is a *petitio principii* to expect the work to be done before the argument is concluded (that is, to expect one of the crucial steps in the argument to depend on successful completion of the work).

This criticism also leaves much to be desired. It is of note that the author puts quotes around "detached" the first time he uses it. Apparently he recognizes here that "*S* detaches an object, *O*, from an experience of his" is a metaphorical way of saying, "On the basis of various experiences of his, *S* justifiably concludes that *O* really exists and/or has some property, *P*": when the author talks about detaching his computer from his experiences on the basis of their coherence, he is giving a phenominalist account of how it is that he knows that his computer is real, namely, the standard phenominalist account in terms of the coherence of his computer-sense-experiences.

It is, I think, a defect in the author's approach that he presents us with such a brief and metaphorical account of phenomenalism. But set that aside. We can, at least, make some sense of what the author is trying to say here.

But it turns out to be the case that experiences of *O* consist not just of *sense*-experiences of *O*, but of *thinking* of *O* as well. And it is not clear what work the author's detachment metaphor is supposed to be doing here. We are not dealing with physical objects *qua* coherent sense-experiences. Rational proof comes to mind. For it is the author's contention that an attempt to "detach" God from our experience of thinking of him via a rational argument is question-begging, and presumably he would say the same thing about any *a priori* argument for the existence of something (e.g., for the existence of a prime number between the numbers 8 and 10). (Or if not, the author needs to tell us why not.) In the end then it looks as if the author is simply stating that empirical existential claims can sometimes be shown to be true, but that non-empirical existential claims can never be rationally demonstrated. But one wonders why he didn't put his point thus straightforwardly. And I submit that, had he done so, it would have been clear that it is the author who is begging the question.

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