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ETERNAL EXISTENCE AND NECESSARY EXISTENCE

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Some philosophers (classical and contemporary) have been tempted to argue, from the fact that some particular object exists *eternally* if at all, to the claim that that object exists *necessarily* if at all. In this paper I shall set out three arguments which are instances of this strategy and which some have found convincing, and then try to show that, despite their initial plausibility, the three arguments depend on a common background assumption which is false, or at least as dubious as any of the argument's conclusions.

1 The first two of the three are closely related; both concern the existence of God. One is offered by Norman Malcolm in "Anselm's ontological arguments,"[1] and goes more or less as follows: Let an *eternal being* be one which by definition exists forever if at all (i.e., one which by definition neither comes into existence nor ceases to exist). Now

1. God, if He exists, is an eternal being (since, in order to be the greatest conceivable being, He must depend for His existence neither on any causal agent nor on mere chance). (Premise)
2. If God does not exist, then He cannot come into existence. (1)
3. If God does exist, then He can neither have come into existence nor cease to exist. (1)
4. If God does not exist, then it is necessary that God does not exist. (2)
5. If God does exist, then it is necessary that God exists. (3)
6. Either it is necessary that God exists or it is impossible that God exists. (4,5)
7. It is not impossible that God exists. (Premise)
8. It is necessary that God exists. (6,7)

$\therefore$9. God exists. (8)

1. N. Malcolm, "Anselm's ontological arguments," in *Knowledge and Certainty*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. (1963), pp. 149-150. I am not quite sure whether Malcolm ascribes the argument to Anselm.

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The second argument appears in Charles Hartshorne's *Anselm's Discovery*;[2] I reconstruct it in this way:

10. If God exists but can be conceived not to exist (even if His existence is of limitless duration), then we can conceive both of His existence and of His nonexistence. (Premise)
11. If both His existence and His nonexistence are conceivable, then so is a transition between them. (Premise)
12. This transition is not conceivable, in God's case (since He is an eternal being). (Premise)
13. His existence and His nonexistence are not both conceivable. (11, 12)
∴14. If God exists, then He cannot be conceived not to exist. (10, 13)

(In fact, 14 follows from 13 alone; so Hartshorne's 10 is actually superfluous.) Hartshorne's remarks on pp. 54-55 indicate that "conceivability" here is to be interpreted as "logical possibility." If so, then 14 is equivalent to, "If God exists, then He exists necessarily." Hartshorne goes on to use this result, along with 7 above, as a lemma in defense of the actual existence of God.

Each of these two proofs contains explicit or suppressed premises which are not obviously true, and require further support. Let us begin with Malcolm's argument. How does Malcolm get from 2 to 4? To investigate, I shall recast his modal talk in terms of possible worlds.[3] 2 may be interpreted as, "If God does not exist in our world, then He comes into existence in no possible world," which is vacuously true due to the truth of its consequent. 4 will be read as, "If God does not exist in our world, then He exists in no possible world." In order to license the direct inference from 2 to 4, then, Malcolm needs a suppressed premise equivalent to "If 2, then 4," i.e., one to the effect that

15. If God does not exist in our world and if He comes into existence in no possible world, then He exists in no possible world.

But 15 is an extremely strong assumption, equivalent (by trivial modal operations) to

16. If God exists in some possible world, then either He exists in our world or He comes into existence in some possible world.

or, more colloquially,

17. If it is possible that God exists, then either He exists or it is possible that He will come into existence.

What could be the rationale for 17? The following defense is the only one that suggests itself: If some thing does not exist now but might possibly

2. C. Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery*, Open Court, LaSalle, Ill. (1965), p. 128.

3. I am assuming a naive (S5-style) system of possible worlds, such that every world is accessible from every other.

exist, then presumably that thing could come into existence. Generalizing the point a bit, we might maintain that any temporal slice[4] of a possible world w ($w \neq$ our world ☺) is a possible future slice of ☺. Let us call this principle "**PF**."[5] It looks somewhat plausible; in order to make a slice of w into a future slice of ☺, all we have to do is annihilate any present individuals of our world that are not individuals of the slice of w, create in our world any individuals of the slice of w that are not already here, and rearrange properties and relations appropriately. And if **PF** is right, 17 is true.

The initial problem for Hartshorne's argument is that the truth of 11 is not obvious. It appears that the justification for 11, too, will presuppose **PF** or something like it; for 11 can be seen to encapsulate the claim (equivalent to 17) that, if God does not exist in our world but does exist in some other possible world, then it is possible that He will come into existence.

PF seems to be what both Malcolm and Hartshorne are assuming. At any rate, we have been given no more specific reasons to accept 11 or 17, and I cannot think of any principle differing significantly from **PF** that could plausibly serve as an ultimate justification in either case.

2 I believe that **PF** is false. I shall try to refute it and then argue that eternal existence does not imply necessary existence. But first let me illustrate its operation in a metaphysical case of more contemporary interest.

Many philosophers believe that classes exist necessarily; and I have frequently heard it claimed, as a reason for this belief, that classes are eternal beings.[6] I have never seen such a line of reasoning spelled out in full, but I think the following argument captures what is going on:

18. The null class exists contingently in our world ☺. (Assumption for *reductio*)
PF. Any possible-world slice is a possible future slice of ☺. (Premise)
19. There is a possible world w_n in which the null class does not exist. (18)
20. Any slice of w_n is a possible future slice of ☺. (**PF**, 19)
21. There is a possible future state of our world ☺ in which the null class does not exist. (19, 20)

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4. A temporal slice is that which is given by a maximally consistent set of *present-tense* sentences.

5. I believe that **PF** or a thesis which entails it was explicitly endorsed by Diodorus Chronos. (See Arthur Prior, *Past, Present and Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (1967), pp. 32ff.) **PF** is lent some intuitive support by the similarity of our currently standard semantical treatments of tense logic and alethic modal logic respectively.

6. There is a hint of this view in Section VIII of David Kaplan's "Quantifying in" in Davidson and Hintikka (eds.), *Words and Objections: Essays on the Work of W. V. Quine*, *Synthese* Library, Reidel, Dordrecht (1969).

22. It is possible for the null class to *cease* to exist (though it exists now). (18, 21)
23. It is not possible for classes to come into existence or cease to exist; in whatever possible worlds they exist, they exist forever. (Premise)
24. It is both possible and not possible for the null class to cease to exist. (22, 23)
25. The null class does not exist contingently. (**PF**, 23, *reductio*)
26. The null class exists. (Premise)
∴27. The null class exists necessarily. (25, 26)

Let us, then, consider **PF**. I offer the following counterexample: Let an "agnew" be (by definition) a gavel that exists forever. In this world there are (presumably) no agnews. But it is possible that there are; so there is a possible world w_a in which there are agnews. From this and **PF** we may conclude that there is a possible future state of our world in which there are agnews. But this would involve agnews' coming into existence in our world, which (since agnews by definition cannot do so) is impossible. So either agnews *cannot* exist (exist in no possible world) or **PF** is false; and therefore **PF** is false.

It may well be objected that I have begged the question in assuming the possibility of the existence of agnews. After all, no one who already firmly believes that all eternal existents are necessary existents would concede that possibility. But the question-begging is at least mutual. The original onus of proof was on those who wanted to argue from eternal existence to necessary existence, to find a principle which would motivate 11 or 17. But **PF** succumbs to the *apparent* possibility of something's existing forever *in all the possible worlds in which it exists* and yet failing to exist (at all) in our world; and we still have not been shown any reason why this apparent possibility should not continue to be considered a real one.

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