A Reply to Professor Rowe

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In this paper I try to show that three of William L. Rowe's criticisms of my book, Theism, are much less than conclusive.

(1) Rowe agrees that I have established, via my defense of Descartes's Fifth Meditation Argument, that God is not a non-existing being. He denies, however, that it follows that God is an existing being. In reply, I reject the thesis that something might be neither an existing nor a non-existing object.

(2) Rowe maintains that the impossibility of God's non-existence might consist simply of its being the case that no one can destroy God—a kind of impossibility which is not strong enough to sustain my (S5) modal argument for God's existence. In reply, I argue that the impossibility of God's non-existence must be logical.

(3) Rowe maintains that it may well be that religious experiencers have experienced God without experiencing him qua maximally great being, so that religious experiences do not provide us with a reason to believe that a maximally great being is logically possible. I argue in reply that if religious experiencers do not experience God qua supremely perfect, then they have no reason to believe that they experience God.

I am grateful to William Rowe for his very generous review of my book. However, I want to reply to three of his criticisms.

1) Rowe agrees that I have established, via my defense of Descartes's Fifth Meditation Argument, that God is not a non-existing object. But he argues as follows that "X is not a non-existing object" does not entail that X is an existing object. Let "magician" = Df "an existing magician." Then no non-existing object is a magician, since "A non-existing object is an existing magician" entails "A non-existing object is an existing object" and, hence, is logically inconsistent. However, there are no (real) magicians, so neither is it the case that magicians are existing objects.

In my book, I argued that Rowe's position is incoherent, since an object which is neither an existing nor a non-existing object must be logically impossible, but since magicians are logically possible, so, too, are magicians. Rowe replies in his review that magicians are, indeed, logically possible but that, since all logically possible objects are either existing objects or non-existing objects, magicians are not logically possible objects and, hence, not objects of any sort.

Rowe's contention that all logically possible objects are either existing objects or non-existing objects is presumably based on the sound intuition that no logically
possible object is neither existing nor non-existing (that all logically possible things either exist or they don't). But what are we to make of the claim that, though it is logically possible that magicians exist and, though there are logically possible objects, magicians are not identical with any? Rowe states that there is an air of paradox here, but he appears to think that the concept of a magician shows that we shall simply have to put up with it. However, I think that Rowe has produced something worse than an air of paradox. If “X’s being a logically possible object” is not an explication of—or at least correlated with—X’s being logically possible, then, in the absence of a much more extensive account of what it is to be a logically possible object than Rowe gives us, the concept of a logically possible object is too obscure to be of philosophical use.

What, then, has gone wrong? One answer to this question is that it is dubious that “A non-existing object is an existing magician” entails that a non-existing object is an existing object, when in fact it is not the case that magicians exist and a fortiori not the case that they are existing objects. Another answer is that “Magicians do not exist” should simply be taken to mean “Nothing is a magician, i.e., nothing is an existing magician.” This locution does not even appear to be logically inconsistent, so long as we do not translate it into talk about non-existing objects. And non-existing objects are surely very dubious entities. As Plantinga has pointed out, “There exists an X such that X does not exist” look on its face to be necessarily false. But given that we dispense with non-existing objects, what Descartes’s argument proves is the straightforward conclusion that it is false that God does not exist; and that indubitably entails that God does exist.

Rowe might wish to raise the following objection here: “Descartes’s Meditation Five argument contains as a premiss the claim that existence is a perfection relative to God. But this presupposes that existence is a property of things, i.e., that ‘exists’ is a descriptive predicate. However, if Dore is going to translate ‘It is not the case that X exists into ‘Nothing is an X’ or (in case X is a proper name or definite description) ‘Nothing is identical with X,’ then he ought to translate ‘It is true that X exists’ into ‘Something is an X’ or (in case X is a proper name or definite description) ‘Something is identical with X’. But then it becomes impossible to formulate adequately the claim that existence is a perfection, and, hence, a property, relative to God.”

But there are two ways of meeting this objection. Consider my formulation of Descartes’s argument:

1. The concept of God is the concept of a supremely perfect being.
2. The concept of existence is the concept of a perfection relative to God.

So
3. It is a conceptual truth that God exists.

Hence
4. God really exists.
Faith and Philosophy

The first way of dealing with the envisaged objection is to substitute for premiss (2), "The concept of being identical with something is the concept of a perfection relative to God." And the second way is to substitute for premiss (2), "The concept of its being true that God exists is the concept of a perfection relative to God." Each new version supports the conclusion that it is a conceptual truth that God exists as strongly as does the original premiss.

Indeed, I am now inclined to think that the latter substitution is the correct one. For, though I defended the thesis that "exist" is a descriptive predicate in my book, I now suspect that this is false. Suppose that "P" is a descriptive predicate. "P" is equivalent to "not not-P." But if "not-P" is not descriptive, then neither is its denial. Hence, if "P" is descriptive, then "not-P" is descriptive as well. It follows that if "exist" is a descriptive predicate, then so is "do not exist." But, e.g., "Centaurs do not exist" expresses a truth. And if "S is P" is a descriptive utterance and expresses a truth, then "P" is true of S. So, since "Centaurs do not exist" expresses a truth, "do not exist" is true of something, namely, centaurs, given that "exist" and, hence, "do not exist," are descriptive. It follows from the claim that "exist" is descriptive, then, that there are non-existent objects; and, once again this is a conclusion which it is best to avoid if that is possible. (It does not follow that there are no possible worlds in which there are objects which are distinct from any individuals in the actual world, only that in quantifying over those worlds, we do not quantify over those objects.)

(2) In commenting on my modal argument, Rowe challenges my claim that there are only two kinds of impossibility, logical and physical, by introducing the concept of metaphysical impossibility—the impossibility which obtains just in case nothing has the power to bring about an individual's non-existence. Now the metaphysical impossibility of God's non-existence is not strong enough to sustain my (S5) modal argument. But it is demonstrable that the impossibility of God's non-existence is stronger than metaphysical.

Suppose that God, an omnipotent being, exists but that there is a possible world in which God does not exist and (as in S5) every possible world is accessible from every other possible world. Then, since an omnipotent being can do everything which it is logically possible that he does, God if he exists, can destroy himself, i.e., God's non-existence is not (even) metaphysically impossible.

Here Rowe may say, "X's non-existence is metaphysically impossible just in case there is no being other than X who can destroy X." However, it can be shown that if God exists, then even he cannot destroy himself. And, in conjunction with God's omnipotence, this yields the conclusion that God's non-existence is logically impossible.

Consider God's perfect goodness. If God exists, then it is either physically or metaphysically or logically impossible for God to do what is wrong. But since God is omnipotent and can work miracles, its being merely physically impossible
that he does what is wrong gives us no guarantee that he refrains from wrongdoing. Moreover, it's being true that no one else can bring it about that he does what is wrong (metaphysical impossibility) gives us no guarantee that he himself does not bring that about. But the concept of a maximally great being is such that if he exists, then we can, with absolute assurance, rely on him not to be a wrongdoer. Hence, if he exists, it is logically impossible that God does wrong. But God's destroying himself would be a gravely wrong thing for him to do. Hence, if God exists, then it is logically impossible that God destroys himself. But, once again, if God is omnipotent and there are possible worlds in which he does not exist, then it is logically possible that he destroys himself. So, if God exists, then because of his omnipotence and the logical necessity of his goodness, there is no possible world in which God does not exist, i.e., his non-existence is logically impossible.

Very similar arguments will show that God's non-omnipotence and non-omniscience are also logically (and not just metaphysically) impossible. I shall demonstrate this conclusion with respect to God's omnipotence and leave it to the reader to apply my argument to God's omniscience. The concept of God, a maximally great being, is such that if God exists, then there is at least one possible world in which he is omnipotent. Suppose, then, that there are possible worlds in which God exists but is not omnipotent. Then, given the accessibility of every possible world from every other possible world, it is possible for God to destroy his own omnipotence. But this would be a piece of grave wrongdoing on his part; and, as we have seen, if he exists, then it is logically impossible that God does what is wrong. So if God exists, and it is even possible that he is omnipotent, then it is logically impossible for him not to be omnipotent, i.e., God's non-omnipotence is not just metaphysically impossible.

(3) Finally, Rowe criticizes my claim that, since "God" means "supremely perfect being," it is unlikely that everyone who has experienced God (in an ontologically neutral sense of "experience") has failed to experience him qua supremely perfect being. (I argue in my book that if people have experienced God qua supremely perfect, then it is logically possible that a supremely perfect being—whose logical possibility guarantees his actuality—exists).

Rowe's criticism goes as follows:

I might mean by "Purdue University," "The university founded by John Purdue." [But] although I've often experienced Purdue University, I don't think I've experienced it qua University founded by John Purdue.

My answer is that if "Purdue University" really does mean "The university founded by John Purdue," then though Rowe has experienced Purdue University without experiencing it qua University founded by John Purdue, he has not experienced it qua Purdue University.
Why, then, do I not agree that though people have experienced God, they may well not have experienced him *qua* supremely perfect being? The answer is that if they have not done the latter then, if “God” really does mean “supremely perfect being,” God-experiencers would not be justified in believing (what they clearly *are* justified in believing) that it is *God* whom they experience, rather than some other being. In the case of Rowe’s experiencing Purdue University, but not *qua* University founded by John Purdue, it *is* possible to justify the claim that what Rowe experiences is in fact the university founded by John Purdue. *Formulating* this justification might not be a simple task. It would ultimately involve historical research, either by Rowe or by people whom Rowe has reason to trust. But only a radical skeptic would believe that it is not in principle possible to give such a justification. However, things are otherwise with God-experiences. It would surely not be possible to do fruitful historical research regarding the connection between the non-defining properties which God-experiencers allegedly experience and the property of being a supremely perfect being. Nor does any other relevant kind of research appear to be available. So, once again, God-experiencers would have no ground for affirming that they have God-experiences unless their experiences are of God *qua* supremely perfect being.

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