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A NOTE ON HINTIKKA'S REFUTATION OF THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

William F. Vallicella

According to Jaakko Hintikka, "The mistake in the main version of the ontological argument . . . is an operator-switch fallacy."¹ From

(1) $N(Ex) [(y) (y \text{ exists} \rightarrow x \text{ exists})]$

one mistakenly infers

(2) $(Ex)N [(y) (y \text{ exists} \rightarrow x \text{ exists})]$.

What (1) says is that, necessarily, there is an individual such that if anything exists, it exists. In a possible worlds semantic framework, (1) amounts to the claim that in each possible world W there is an individual x such that if anything exists in W , x exists in W . This leaves open the possibility that the condition is satisfied by different individuals in different possible worlds. That is, it leaves open the possibility that, for example, in W_1 , $x = a$ while in W_2 , $x = b$. Thus (1) does not entail (2), since (2) says that there is a unique individual, the same in all possible worlds, that satisfies the condition. According to Hintikka, ". . . the failure of this identity is precisely the fatal flaw in the usual versions of the ontological argument." (p. 133)

Thus for Hintikka the proponent of the ontological argument is either illicitly inferring (2) from (1), or else simply confusing the two and trying to derive the benefits of both without paying the price of either. (1) is logically true, but trivial. (2) is nontrivial, but not logically true. It is only by confusing (1) and (2), that "Anselm, Descartes & Co." can claim a result that is both certain and nontrivial.

Although this diagnosis certainly helps illuminate the issues surrounding the ontological argument, it is open to what I think is a fairly obvious objection.

Let us begin with the admission that the passage from (1) to (2) is a clear *non sequitur*. But what exactly does this have to do with the ontological argument, in say Anselm's *Proslogion III* version? As Hintikka is well aware, his diagnosis succeeds only if (1) fairly represents what Anselm thinks he has proven. But is it true that "the whole of (1) seems to express quite well the Anselmian idea that the most perfect being—a being greater than which cannot be conceived of—must necessarily exist . . ."? (p. 129) It is hard to see how it does. First of all, (1) embodies a questionable assimilation of the ontological to the cosmological argument. But we shall let that pass since it seems Hintikka could have made his

"operator-switch" point without that assimilation. Secondly, and more importantly, (1) is trivially true, and as Hintikka admits, "the triviality of (1) is reflected by the fact that any existing individual can be chosen as the value of the existentially bound variable 'x' in (1)." (p. 130) Indeed, numerically the same individual might be the value of both variables. But if anything can be the value of "x," (1) expresses nothing proper to God. For Ronald Reagan also has the property of being such that, if anything exists, then he exists. Indeed, everything has this property. Thus we must reject Hintikka's claim that "the inside conditional in (1), viz. (y) (y exists $\rightarrow$ x exists), can be considered as a characterization of god (= x), conceived of as the most powerful being with respect to existence." (p. 129) For, to repeat, simply everything is characterized by this inside conditional! The reason is easy to discern. The Philonian (material) conditional is such that any two propositions can stand in the relation of material implication provided that it is not the case that the antecedent is true and consequent false. Thus "The Charles River exists" materially implies "Reagan exists." But this scarcely means that one can validly infer the existence of Reagan from the existence of the Charles River. The upshot is that (1), *pace* Hintikka, completely fails to express "the Anselmian idea that the most perfect being . . . must necessarily exist."

At the risk of belaboring the obvious, let me make it crystal clear where the confusion lies. It lies in the sentence: "Thus the inside conditional in (1), viz. (y) (y exists $\rightarrow$ x exists), can be considered as a characterization of god (= x), conceived of as the most powerful being with respect to existence." The part of the sentence before "conceived" is no doubt true, but vacuously so: the inside conditional characterizes God by virtue of characterizing everything. But the second part of the sentence—the part after "conceived"—contradicts the first part. For to conceive God as existentially *most* powerful is to conceive Him as unique, as distinct from all else. Thus the sentence under analysis embodies a confusion between a unique and a non-unique characterization of God. Hintikka thinks he is giving what is needed, a unique characterization, but he is patently failing to do so.

But this is not all; a further confusion seems to be at work. One way Hintikka's claim that "the whole of (1) seems to express quite well the Anselmian idea that the most perfect being . . . must necessarily exist" could be true would be if the inside conditional in (1) expressed strict, rather than material, implication. It *would be* a unique characterization of God to say of Him that his existence is analytically entailed by the existence of any individual whatsoever. For surely this does not hold of any individual other than God. But then Hintikka faces a dilemma: Either the inside conditional in (1) expresses material implication, or it expresses strict implication. If the former, then the inside conditional fails to characterize God uniquely, and Hintikka's reconstruction of the ontological argument fails. If the latter, (1) transmogrifies into (2), as Hintikka is well aware.

(p. 132) But if (1) collapses into (2), then there is no longer a basis for Hintikka's charge of "operator-switch" fallacy. So either Hintikka fails to reconstruct the argument, or he fails to show its invalidity.

Now Hintikka seems to be aware of something like this objection. His response is that "If we try to insert a necessity-operator to front the inner conditional of (1), we lose the trivial logical truth of (1)." (p. 132) This is no doubt true, but simply throws him back onto the first horn of the dilemma, in which case he fails to reconstruct any interesting version of the ontological argument, and certainly not the most important version, the one contained in *Proslogion III*.

These remarks may be summed up by saying that Anselm *et al.* cannot be accused of confusing (1) and (2), for (1) has nothing to do with any interesting version of the ontological argument inasmuch as (1) fails to characterize God uniquely.

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NOTES

1. Jaakko Hintikka, "Kant on Existence, Predication, and the Ontological Argument," *Dialectica*, vol. 35, nos. 1-2 (1981), p. 129. All further references are to this article. See also Hintikka's earlier paper, "On the Logic of the Ontological Argument: Some Elementary Remarks," *Models for Modalities: Selected Essays* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 45-54.