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MORE ON THE POSSIBILITY OF GOD

Clement Dore

In this paper, I draw a distinction between two kinds of impossibility and maintain that one is entitled to suppose that they do not obtain, in the absence of a reason to think that they do. I claim that there is no reason to think that the first kind obtains with respect to God and that, though there are non-negligible arguments that the second kind does, my argument for the possibility of God, which appeared in an earlier volume of this journal, adequately rebuts those arguments.

James Patrick Downey has offered a criticism of an argument of mine for the logical possibility of God’s existence which appeared in an earlier issue of this journal. The essence of Downey’s criticism lies in the following quote:

If possible existence is included in the concept of an individual, A, does this not establish that it is a conceptual truth that A is possible? No, for consider the concept of Arthur, the supremely perfect being that is F and not F for some property F. If possible existence is a perfection, then it is logically included in the concept of Arthur, since that concept includes all perfections. Nevertheless, it does not follow that it is a conceptual truth that Arthur is possible. That Arthur is possible cannot be any sort of truth. Since the concept of Arthur is not consistent, there can be no such being.

Downey draws the conclusion that the fact that logical possibility is (also) included in the concept of God does not entail that God is logically possible.

In replying to Downey, it will be useful for me to start by drawing a distinction between what I shall call “narrowly logically impossible descriptions” (NLI-descriptions) and “broadly logically impossible descriptions” (BLI-descriptions). The former are descriptions that contain “F and not F” and equivalent expressions, and the latter are descriptions which, though they do not, are nonetheless such that it is logically impossible for them to apply to anything. “Arthurhood” is an NLI-description. Examples of BLI-descriptions are as follows: “having shape but no size,” “being red all over and green all over,” “being north of something X, which is north of something Y, without being north of Y,” and “being a person who has as much power and knowledge as God and who is nonetheless distinct from God.”

Now it is, I think, clear that when we assert that something, which bears a
certain description, exists, we are not always committed to showing that such a thing is logically possible. Rather, barring that it is self-evidently logically impossible, there is an onus on anyone who maintains that it is in fact logically impossible to present an argument for that claim. And this is true of NLI-descriptions and of BLI-descriptions. If a given description, D, is not self-evidently an NLI-description, then there is an onus on anyone who maintains that it is to show that this is so. And, similarly, if D is not self-evidently a BLI-description, then there is also an onus on someone who claims that it is in fact BLI to argue for his claim.

Now, "being a supremely perfect being" is, unlike "Arthurhood," not self-evidently an NLI-description. And I submit that no one (including Downey) has successfully proven that it is NLI. On the other hand, there are nonnegligible arguments for the conclusion that it is a BLI-description. One such argument goes as follows:

"Consider the following pseudo-demonstration:

(1) Let 'a super-centaur' = DF 'a centaur that exists with logical necessity.'

Then

(2) if a super-centaur exists, then it exists with logical necessity.

But

(3) whatever is such that if it exists, then it exists with logical necessity, is also such that, if it is logically possible that it exists, then it exists.

(See S5.)

And

(4) it is logically possible that super-centaurs exist.

So

(5) super-centaurs exist.

Plainly, we must hold that this argument, and similar arguments for the existence of similar Gaunilo-type entities, are unsound. For we can refuse to do so only upon pain of accepting a wildly inflated ontology. But the argument is clearly valid, and the most plausible candidate for being a false premise is the assertion that it is logically possible that there are super-centaurs. However, since the concept of God, a supremely perfect being, is such that a closely similar modal argument for God's existence can be constructed, it would be irrationally arbitrary to affirm that God is logically possible, unless there is an argument that he is. And no such argument is available."

Now my argument for the possibility of God should be taken as, among other things, an attempt to rebut the foregoing argument and not to refute the claim that "supremely perfect being" is an NLI-description. For, once again,
there is no onus on anyone to show that a given description is not NLI, unless either it is, like Arthur, self-evidently so (in which case this cannot be shown), or there is a plausible argument that it is; and neither of these conditions is satisfied with respect to "supremely perfect being."

Finally, there are two further nonnegligible arguments that "supremely perfect being" is BLI:

1. "As was said in connection with the pseudo demonstration of the existence of super-centaurs,

(a) if it is logically possible that a supremely perfect being exists, then he exists with logical necessity.

So

(b) 'it is logically possible that a supremely perfect being exists' is logically incompatible with 'it is logically possible that a supremely perfect being does not exist.'

But

(c) the latter proposition is as apt to be true as the former one, in the absence of an argument for the former one which is not also an argument for the latter one.

And

(d) no such argument is available.

So

(e) modal arguments for the existence of God are no stronger than the argument that, since it is possible that God does not exist, God does not exist.

2. "Dore has claimed in effect that statements of the form, 'It is possibly true that p,' do not need to be defended unless they are self-evidently false or there is a plausible argument that they are false. But in fact this does not hold true when p is a mathematical, or a logical, axiom or theorem, precisely because such propositions are, if possibly true, true. And 'God exists' bears the latter description. So it will no more do to assert without argument that 'God exists' is possibly true than to assert without argument that, say, Goldbach's conjecture or Fermat's last theorem is possibly true. However, no argument for the claim that 'God exists' is possibly true is available."

So go the arguments. My reply to Downey is, in essence, that my demonstration of the possibility of God would be superfluous if it were an attempt to show that God is not Arthur-like, since there is no reason to think that he is, but that it is not superfluous if we construe it as an attempt to rebut the three arguments for God's broadly logical impossibility, which I have pre-
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sented above. Moreover, as against Downey, I contend that, since the concept of logical possibility is included in the concept of God, and since “God (the supremely perfect being)” is neither self-evidently NLI nor self-evidently BLI, we have reason to reject the envisaged arguments.

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NOTES
