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THE ALLEGED DEPENDENCY OF THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT ON THE ONTOLOGICAL

J. William Forgie

In a recent issue of *Faith and Philosophy*, William Vallicella maintains that the cosmological argument (CA) depends on the ontological argument (OA), not on an OA "from mere concepts", as Kant wrongly supposed, but on a modal OA "from possibility". He argues (1) that the CA "presupposes" that God (or the *ens realissimum*) is possible, and therefore (2) that the CA depends on the OA in a way that renders the CA superfluous. I suggest that although (1) is undeniably true, the notion of presupposition Vallicella uses is insufficiently epistemic to allow his inference from (1) to (2).

In a recent issue of *Faith and Philosophy*, William Vallicella considers Kant's contention that the cosmological argument (CA) depends for its cogency on the ontological argument (OA).¹ He distinguishes two kinds of ontological argument, one "from mere concepts" and one "from possibility". He generously cites, and expresses agreement with, my own view that Kant fails to show that the CA depends on the OA from mere concepts.² However, he believes the CA does depend (a dependency Kant did not consider) on the OA from possibility. I am not persuaded by this latter claim.

Some brief background. Kant considers cosmological arguments that proceed in two stages. In the first stage one argues from the existence of anything at all to the existence of a necessary being. In the second stage one argues from the existence of a necessary being to the existence of God, or a supreme being, or – to employ Kant's idiom – an *ens realissimum*. Kant maintains that in this second stage of the CA the cosmological arguer makes claims which entail:

Every *ens realissimum* is a necessary being;

He thinks this in turn entails:

From the mere concept of an *ens realissimum* the necessary existence of its object can be inferred.

Kant claims that (b) is precisely what the ontological argument maintains. And it is because of this commitment to (b) that Kant concludes that the cogency of the CA depends on that of the OA. Thus the CA, and its pretensions to offer a proof of God based on experience, is superfluous.

I believe Kant's dependency argument can be resisted by distinguishing between a proposition's being necessarily true on the one hand and our being able to establish a priori that it is true on the other. We can then resist Kant's claim that (a) entails (b). The details of this position are worked out in the paper referred to earlier.

Vallicella concedes this criticism of Kant, and he agrees that Kant has failed to show that the CA depends on the OA from mere concepts. But he believes a new dependency argument can be developed, one which reveals that the CA depends on the OA from possibility. By an OA "from possibility" Vallicella has in mind an argument that proceeds as follows:

God (the *ens realissimum*) is possible;
 Either God is impossible or God necessarily exists;
 Therefore, God necessarily exists.

Let us suppose that God, or the *ens realissimum*, is understood in such a way that the second premise of this argument is true – as, for example, a being which is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good in all possible worlds. That such a being is possible, exists in some possible world, would then entail that that being exists in all possible worlds, including the actual world. (Alternatively, if such a being's non-existence is possible, if there is a possible world in which it does not exist, then that being does not exist in any possible world, including the actual world.)

Like Kant, Vallicella focuses on the second stage of the CA, the move from necessary being to God (or, as he puts it, from the *ens necessarium* (EN) to the *ens realissimum* (ER)).³ The heart of his new dependency argument is his claim that 1) the CA "presupposes" that the ER is possible. Because of this, 2) the CA depends on the OA from possibility in a way which renders the CA superfluous.

How does the CA presuppose the possibility of the ER? Vallicella explains the presupposition relation he has in mind as follows:

To say that an argument *presupposes* a proposition is not to say that it features that proposition as an explicit premise, but that it has it as an implicit premise in the absence of which the argument would not be sound.⁴

I take it that when Vallicella speaks of something "in the absence of which" the argument would not be sound he means something whose falsity would render the argument unsound. For he wants to say the CA presupposes "the ER is possible", and that proposition is presumably necessarily true if true at all. But if it is true, then it will not matter to the soundness of any argument whether that claim is or is not included as a premise – i.e., in a rather straightforward sense of "absent", it will not matter whether or not that premise is present or absent from the argument. If the argument was sound when it included that necessarily true premise it will remain sound without that premise – in either case the argument will have all true premises and it will be impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false.

So it is not unreasonable to read Vallicella as claiming that an argument presupposes a proposition A just in case that argument would not be sound were A false. This understanding is reinforced by the following passage in which Vallicella summarizes his position:

... the problem for the second half of the CA is whether or not one can show that the EN is the ER. This is a question of identification, a question of specifying which being this necessary being is. But the attempt to identify the EN with the ER presupposes that the ER is possible. For something that has been proven to exist (the EN) cannot be identified with something that is impossible.⁵

Here the CA presupposes that the ER is possible because if the ER were not possible the CA will not succeed in proving that the ER is actual. Once again the idea seems to be that an argument presupposes anything whose falsity would be incompatible with the argument's being sound.

Given this understanding of an argument's presupposing a proposition, it is undeniable that the CA presupposes the proposition that the ER is possible. Now Vallicella claims that this shows that the CA "depends on" the OA. What does this mean? At the outset of his paper, Vallicella points to two senses in which one argument may depend on another. He distinguishes "soundness" dependence from what he calls "probativeness" dependence. To say the CA depends on the OA for its soundness is only to make the trivial claim that if the CA is sound then the OA is sound. Vallicella is concerned to make the stronger claim that the CA will be probative only if the OA is probative. He says, for example:

... the CA presupposes that the ER is possible. But if so, then the CA depends on the OA for its probativeness.⁶

To call an argument probative is to make a claim about the argument's "fitness for producing genuine knowledge". Vallicella lists the following five necessary conditions for an argument's being probative (he leaves undecided whether these conditions are jointly sufficient):

... a deductive argument is probative only if it is (i) valid in point of logical form, has (ii) true premises that are (iii) known to be true, (iv) avoids *petitio principii*, and (v) is such that the premises are relevant to the conclusion.⁷

Vallicella's claim that the CA depends on the OA then entails the claim that the CA will not satisfy these five conditions unless the OA does. In particular he is committed to claiming that the CA will not be probative, will not produce "genuine knowledge", unless the key premise in the OA (the very proposition presupposed by the CA), viz., the claim that the ER is possible, is not only true but known to be true.

We might hear Vallicella's dependency claim in a relatively trivial way. If one completes the CA and thus comes to know that the ER actually exists, he then could at that point presumably deduce, and hence come to

know, that the ER is possible. And from there he could go on to produce a probative OA. In this sense a probative CA is sufficient for a probative OA, and hence the CA will be probative only if the OA is. Here, although there is probative dependency, the CA is indispensable; one still must rely on a successful CA in order to be in a position to produce a successful OA. But I will ignore this sort of case, for Vallicella is making the more interesting claim that the CA depends for its probativeness on the OA *in a way which renders the CA superfluous*. On his view, the cosmological arguer could, as it were, stop in the middle of the second stage of his argument, focus on the presupposed proposition and generate a probative ontological argument from the claim that the ER is possible, not even bothering to finish his cosmological argument which, with its original appeal to experience, is not now (nor was it ever) needed. As he puts it:

... if the CA cannot attain its ultimate goal without presupposing in its second half the real possibility of the ER, then one can simply begin with this possibility and "run" some such OA as ... [the one outlined just above]... The recourse to experience would then be an unnecessary detour.⁸

Along the way to proving the existence of the ER, the CA presupposes a proposition which is itself sufficient to generate an ontological proof of the existence of the ER. The CA is thus superfluous because it cannot demonstrate anything that couldn't just as well be demonstrated by the probative OA that sets out merely from the presupposed proposition.

Suspensions might be aroused about Vallicella's argument if we employ the same sort of reasoning in other contexts.

1. Suppose I wish to produce an argument for the existence of God based on religious or mystical experience. I might first argue that certain experiences must be agreed to have a supernatural cause. Having tried to establish that, I might go on to argue that that supernatural cause must be the ER (thinking of the ER in such a way that its possibility entails its actuality). My argument could not be sound unless such a being were at least possible. But then, given Vallicella's approach, my argument presupposes that the ER is possible. And so, my argument then depends on the OA, and I could just start with that presupposed proposition and generate, via the OA, a proof of the ER. My argument from mystical experience would have been exposed as superfluous. (Indeed, any theistic proof, other than the OA, for a God whose possibility entails its actuality would be similarly superfluous.)
2. Suppose you wish to produce an argument from evil for the non-existence of God (again conceiving of God in such a way that His possibility entails His actuality). Then your argument will not be sound unless it is at least possible that God does *not* exist. Your argument thus presupposes that God's non-existence is possible. But then you could start with that presupposed proposition and produce a probative ontological argument for the non-existence of God. (If it is possible that such a God does not exist, then it is necessarily true that He does not.) Your argument from evil for atheism is rendered superfluous.

3. Andrew Wiles recently proved Fermat's Last Theorem (FLT). His argument cannot be sound unless it is at least possible that that theorem is true. Therefore Wiles' argument presupposes that FLT is possibly true. But if it is possibly true, then it is necessarily true, and Wiles could have saved himself much labor by just starting with the presupposed proposition and generating a quick proof of the truth of FLT. His actual proof, the results of years of labor, would be superfluous because it would presuppose a proposition from which alone we could derive his conclusion.

In each of these examples we have an initial argument for a conclusion C. The initial argument would not be sound unless a certain proposition P were true. So the initial argument presupposes P. It so happens that P itself entails the conclusion C of the initial argument. Thus P, if true, would serve as the first premise in a sound argument for C. And so it is claimed that the initial argument is superfluous, that one could just start with the presupposed proposition and argue directly for C from that.

Surely something has gone wrong here. If we agree, in each case, that the initial argument presupposes a proposition P, we are only acknowledging a point about logical relations. We are merely agreeing that the truth of P is a logically necessary condition for the soundness of the initial argument. But more is required if we are to judge the initial argument superfluous. As we pass through the initial argument we are hoping to come to know that (or attain some other epistemically favorable relation to, e.g., justifiably believe that) its conclusion C is true. If this route to C is to be shown superfluous it needs to be shown that in order successfully to pass through the initial argument we will need to attain a certain epistemic relation to the presupposed proposition P which will allow us, starting with that proposition, to attain the same (or better) epistemically favorable relation to C that we were going to attain through the initial argument.

But to say the initial argument presupposes a proposition P says nothing about any epistemic relation the initial arguer is required to have towards P. Suppose the conclusion C of the initial argument entails a further proposition D. Since C is sufficient for D, D is necessary for C. Thus no argument for C will be sound unless D is true. Given the notion of presupposition we are working with, this means that the initial argument presupposes D. But the initial arguer may never have entertained D, let alone believed, justifiably believed, or known it. An argument can presuppose a proposition without the arguer having any particular epistemic relation towards the proposition presupposed. Thus the arguer may not have an epistemic relation toward the presupposed proposition strong enough to generate the favorable epistemic relation toward his conclusion C that his initial argument gives him. And this means, to use Vallicella's terminology, that although the initial argument may presuppose P, no independent argument for C starting from P need be probative. In that case, the initial argument will not be superfluous; it may be the only way the arguer is able to come to know his conclusion C.

The Wiles example brings out dramatically the gap between the logical point about presupposition and the epistemological requirement for superfluity. Of course Wiles' proof will not be sound unless FLT is possibly true.

And we can then say, if we like, that his proof presupposes that the theorem is possibly true. But this has no epistemic consequences. In particular, it does not show Wiles' work is for nought. The presupposed proposition will, if true, be the first premise in a brief and sound argument for the truth of FLT. But we do not have a strong enough epistemic relation to it – and will not have until Wiles' proof is finished and seen to be successful – in order to use *it* to come to as strong an epistemic relation to FLT itself as we can come to via Wiles' proof. Everyone would agree that the argument, "FLT is possibly true; therefore, it is actually true", is valid and, if the premise is true, it is sound. But it is of course absurd to suppose that one might, pre-Wiles, come to know⁹ that FLT is true by passing through this short argument from possibility. No pre-Wiles argument starting with the presupposed proposition will be probative. Surely this is because no one – prior to working through Wiles' longer proof – knows or even has good reason for believing that FLT is even possibly true. These desirable epistemic relations toward the possibility premise come – and come trivially – only after availing ourselves of Wiles' indispensable work.

There are lessons here for the case of the CA and the OA. Because of the way we are conceiving the ER, such a being is actual just in case it is possible. So the CA (indeed, as we have seen, any proof of the actuality of the ER) presupposes that the ER is possible.¹⁰ But this has no relevant epistemic implications. The presupposed proposition, if true, can serve as the first premise in a brief and sound argument for the same conclusion we arrive at through the CA. But we need not have any particular epistemic relation to the presupposed proposition.¹¹ In particular we may not have as favorable an epistemic relation to it as we have to the proposition 'the EN exists', that starting point of the second half of the CA which leads the cosmological arguer to the conclusion that the ER actually exists. In that case the CA will not be superfluous. One may come to know in the first part of that argument that the EN exists and then – from that, and only from that – arrive at the conclusion that the ER exists.

My argument here can be summarized as follows. To show that the CA is theoretically superfluous one must show that for one to go through the CA – and come to know via that route that the ER exists – requires attaining, prior to the end of the argument, a favorable epistemic relation towards the claim that the ER is possible, a relation which is sufficient for coming to know, via the OA, that the ER is actual. But, given what Vallicella appears to mean by "presuppose", then even if an argument A for a conclusion C presupposes a proposition P, one could use A to attain a favorable epistemic relation to C without having – prior to reaching the conclusion C – any particular epistemic relation to P, let alone an epistemic relation which will allow one to attain the same (or better) epistemic relation toward C that (than) A itself provides. Thus, even if the CA presupposes the possibility of the ER, it does not follow that the CA depends on the OA in any way which renders the CA superfluous.

To make his case, Vallicella needs a more epistemic notion of presupposition. The required notion must do two things. It must allow him plausibly to claim that the CA presupposes that the ER is possible. And it must allow him an inference from that to his claim about the probative dependence of

the CA on the OA. The notion Vallicella actually seems to employ is adequate to the first task, but not to the second. But I suspect that a revised notion, adequate to the second task, will fail at the first. For the general considerations advanced above to question the inference from presupposition to dependence will almost certainly now be available to question any more epistemically flavored initial claim of presupposition itself.^{12 13}

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NOTES

1. William F. Vallicella, "Does the Cosmological Argument Depend on the Ontological?", *Faith and Philosophy* 17, no. 4 (October, 2000), pp. 441-458.

2. J. William Forgie, "Kant on the Relation between the Cosmological and Ontological Arguments", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 34 (1993), pp. 1-12.

3. Vallicella also finds the same dependency on the OA in the first stage of the CA. But his claim to find dependency there does not introduce any new factors – his claim of dependency in the first stage stands or falls with the claim of dependency in the second stage – and so I will concentrate on whether the second stage depends on the OA.

4. op. cit., endnote 16, p. 457.

5. op. cit., p. 449.

6. ibid.

7. op. cit., p. 442.

8. op. cit., p. 449.

9. For simplicity, let us suppose that the desired epistemic relation in these examples is knowledge.

10. Similarly, any attempted proof that the ER is possible will "presuppose" that the ER is actual.

11. Discussions of versions of the modal ontological argument from possibility have revealed how difficult it is to establish, or even provide good grounds for, its possibility premise. My own view is that if we think of God in such a way that His possibility entails His actuality, then (a) 'God (or the ER) is possible' is a necessary, but a posteriori, proposition; and (b) we can attain a favorable epistemic relation to that proposition only by first attaining that favorable relation to the proposition 'God (the ER) is actual'. For a partial development of this view see my "The Modal Ontological Argument and the Necessary A Posteriori", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 29 (1991), pp. 129-141. If this outlook is correct, then it will be the ontological argument from possibility which is superfluous, for its success will require a prior argument (perhaps a successful CA) for God's actuality.

12. For example, one might define presupposition in such a way that an argument A for conclusion C presupposes a proposition P if one must invoke the knowledge that P is true in order to use A to arrive at knowledge of C. This will make it easier to make Vallicella's inference from his claim of presupposition to his claim of dependency. But it will at the same time make it much more difficult to make the case that the CA really does presuppose that the ER is possible.

13. Many thanks to Bill Vallicella for much helpful discussion.