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Book Review: Rethinking The Ontological Argument: A Neo-Classical Response

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oddly, God does not (and again we wonder what “genuine” means here, since God genuinely manages to produce them). So it seems that Hill has a problem no matter which way he goes. Some of these problems could be blunted were Hill able to show that necessarily, every maximally powerful being is also omnipotent, since he defines omnipotence roughly this way: x is omnipotent just if, for every state of affairs S , if S is in some possible being’s DPC, S is in x ’s DPC (p. 169). Hill does not argue for this, and the problems just outlined are reasons to think that it can’t be shown.

Reviewers should praise and not just bury; I’ll say again that this is a book worth reading. Routledge should be encouraged to come out with a paper edition: the book’s price is an outrage.²

NOTES

1. My thanks to Joseph Jedwab here.
2. My thanks to the author, correspondence with whom considerably improved this review.

Rethinking the Ontological Argument: A Neoclassical Theistic Response, by Daniel A. Dombrowski. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. vii and 172. Cloth \$70.00.

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As its title suggests, the book purports to defend Anselm’s famous argument from a distinctly process philosophical perspective, namely that of Charles Hartshorne. The book’s six chapters can be further reduced to four categories: (a) a historical survey of the argument (Plato’s anticipation, Anselm’s initial articulation, various versions and interpretations after Anselm, and Hume’s critique), (b) a critique of the contemporary opponents in the non-analytic tradition (Richard Rorty and Mark Taylor), (c) a critique of the most prominent contemporary opponent in the analytic tradition (Graham Oppy), and finally (d) a criticism of classical theism. This book is, as one can see, more than just a philosophical examination of the validity and soundness of the argument itself. So, those readers who are solely interested in seeing an ‘analytic’ discussion of the argument will likely be disappointed, as is evident in William Lane Craig’s searing review in *Philosophia Christi* (9:1). While sharing some of the disappointment, which will be shown below, I wish to pay closer attention to Dombrowski’s central claim throughout his work, that the ontological argument’s cogency and merit—both philosophical and religious—logically requires the neoclassical view of God.

Let us first examine Dombrowski’s formulation of the argument and its defense against Oppy’s critique, and secondly his criticism of classical theism. He sees two distinct versions of the argument in Anselm’s *Proslogion*, one in chapter 2 and the other in chapter 3, favoring the latter as the stronger of the two. Although he questions its truth later, Dombrowski grants, for the sake of argument, that Kant’s objection, ‘Existence is not a

predicate,' defuses the first version, while the second, the modal version, is immune to it because modality of existence can be unproblematically considered a predicate. The reasoning goes like this: since I have no discernible problem making sense of my contingent existence as a genuine attribute of my being, and necessary and contingent existence are symmetrically interdependent with each other logically (one cannot be understood without the other), necessary existence must be a predicate. Dombrowski offers us his fellow process philosopher George Goodwin's (Hartshornean) formulation of Anselm's second version as follows:

1. Modality of existence is a predicate.
2. The existence of God is either necessary or impossible (due to the logic of perfection).
3. The existence of God is possible (conclusion from other theistic arguments, including the argument from religious experience).
4. The existence of God is necessary. (pp. 96–97)

The logic of perfection excludes contingent existence (Premise 2). Here I agree with Dombrowski that Premise 2 by itself constitutes a strikingly profound contribution of Anselm's argument, which asserts that a contingently existing perfect being is a contradiction in terms. Moreover, a potential objection based on the Humean notion that all existence must be contingent is exposed for its question-begging nature, which Oppy himself has acknowledged: the ontological argument itself at least constitutes a challenge to this empiricist assumption, and if sound, a decisive refutation of it.

Shoring up the argument with modal categories as above, of course, does not avoid all problems. The most general problem according to Oppy is that the argument either begs the question or makes a logically illicit move. Even though Dombrowski considers several other objections, like the perfect island argument and Kant's objection, I shall discuss and evaluate only his treatment of the main objection posed by Oppy.

Oppy contends that the ontological arguer either begins the argument with the *extensional* concept of God (namely there is a member of the class 'God') in the premise and concludes with the same *extensional* concept, which is to beg the question, or illicitly moves from the *intensional* sense of God (a mere definition) in the premise to the *extensional* sense in the conclusion. For Oppy, the latter horn of the dilemma is simply that from a mere *abstract, universal* characterization of God as necessarily existent, one cannot validly derive a conclusion about the *concrete, particular* existence of God. Dombrowski's central response to this problem is to appeal to the neoclassical theistic understanding of the relationship between the abstract and the concrete, or more specifically, the distinction between existence and actuality. In his own words, "God's *existence*, the fact that God exists, is an abstract constant; by way of contrast, God's *actuality*, or *how* God exists, is contingent and changes in concrete detail from moment to moment" (p. 100). The ontological argument, for neoclassical theists, does not conclude with a claim about a concrete existence of God, but rather, a

purely abstract claim that God exists necessarily, which in turn entails another abstract claim that *some* concrete state of God's existence is necessary. As long as the argument does not entail a claim about any specific way of existing, Dombrowski believes the argument is free of any illicit move.

This response, distinguishing existence from actuality and characterizing existence as abstract and actuality as concrete, is bound to bewilder any typical reader without a prior commitment or inclination to process philosophy: How can existence and actuality be *really* distinct? Perhaps all of us can agree that necessary existence is an abstract property and likewise that perfect being is an abstract concept. But how can a claim about something's actual existence, namely the conclusion that God exists necessarily, which entails that God exists in *this actual world*, be abstract? There must be some confusion in the way Dombrowski uses the terms, *abstract* and *concrete*. The conclusion that God exists necessarily can be construed as abstract only in the sense that the *proposition itself* is an abstract thing, likened to a Platonic form or universal that can be instantiated by a concrete particular—but the question of whether that proposition is instantiated in the world is a separate matter. However, the *object* of the proposition, what the proposition is about, is not an abstract entity, but rather, a concrete existing thing called "God."

Oppy's complaint is then precisely that the ontological arguer moves from the premise (a proposition), which is about an abstract object, in the beginning of the argument, i.e., the concept or the abstract property of necessary existence and the abstract concept of a perfect being, to the conclusion (*another* proposition), which is about a concrete object, in the end, i.e., God's necessary existence, not as an abstract concept, but as referring to a really existing entity in this world. It seems to me that Dombrowski's foregoing confusion ultimately stems from being unable to recognize a certain *incommensurability* between the abstract and the concrete, between our thought world and the actual world, which lies at the root of the problem that prevents Anselm's argument from being convincing to all. I can only conjecture that it is Dombrowski's idealistic bent—which no doubt is inherent in process philosophy, the tradition that received its influence from German Idealism and ultimately from Plato himself—that led him to overlook the entrenched incommensurability between the abstract and the concrete, and create an *ad hoc* distinction between existence and actuality.

Dombrowski's misunderstanding continues when he says that "the necessary existence of God demonstrated in the argument is not meant to show any particular feature of the world, . . . but only a purely general status of any possible world, viz., that it be deified" (p. 104). The general status of possible worlds including our own, supposedly demonstrated by the ontological argument, precisely entails the *particular* feature that the perfect being exists in this world. Dombrowski, however, emphasizes again and again that "in neoclassical theism[,] God's *existence* is not particular, although God's *actuality* is" (p. 104). But this view of existence flies in the face of how we normally experience existence in the actual world, namely, that existence is *irreducibly particular*—though not purely particular. (Note further that I do not assume that affirming the particularity/concreteness of existence must always mean contingency.) And therein lies one of the lessons to be learned from Kant's famous objection that existence is not a

predicate; it is not some purely abstract property like the mathematical object 'oneness,' which cannot be said to *exist* in this world. In my summation, therefore, Dombrowski's neoclassical theistic distinction of existence and actuality is an inadequate answer to Oppy's major objection.

Dombrowski's main criticism of classical theism and thus his defense of neoclassical theism are found in the last chapter. The central question there is: Which theistic model is more consistent with the idea of perfection in the ontological argument? Classical theistic philosophers and theologians, especially of the Christian tradition in the West, have exerted much effort to make their conception of God as a perfect being coherent. Dombrowski invokes such familiar problems as the problem of evil, of foreknowledge and freedom, of an eternal God's relation to the temporal world, and the list goes on. Dombrowski happily points to the contemporary classical theistic philosophers and theologians, like Thomas Morris and the Open Theists, who, in his estimate, make certain concessions to process philosophy when faced with the arduous task of reconciling the far removed and static Unmoved Mover with the dynamic God of the Bible. Dombrowski dismisses the Thomistic distinction between real and relational change as philosophically vacuous. Furthermore, classical theism fails to uphold the religious significance of the ontological argument because it encourages a type of dualism that places religious thinking and religious experience into two separate spheres.

It would be a mistake, Dombrowski argues, to think that the ever-changing, temporal, and dependent God of process philosophy is unfit for the title of the greatest conceivable being (p. 143). Then which God is the perfect one? This question is admittedly not easy to settle. However, it is appropriate to challenge Dombrowski's and the common disdain for the Deity of classical theism. I believe the God of classical theism is epistemically more natural and intuitive to us, and religiously more powerful and satisfying than the process theologian's God. Because we are personally aware of our deep limitation that comes from our changing, temporal existence, it is natural to find ourselves with an intuition about a perfect being that is without such limitations. Our absolute dependence on God (i.e., faith) requires on the flip side an absolutely independent God. Our recognition of God's absolute self-sufficiency makes grace intelligible and experienceable, for creation itself is God's free gift and God's loving us and calling us to His service, when He does not need us at all, is utterly gratuitous. Furthermore, if the life of faith can be recognized as a passionate pursuit of and search for God, the transcendent God is more likely to inspire such passion than the immanent God, 'the World Soul.' (In my view neoclassical theism merely pays lip service to God's transcendence.) It is no accident then that the most fascinating philosophical argument in history is found in the middle of a pathos-filled prayer by Anselm, a *saint* and a paragon of classical theism:

What shall he do, most high Lord, what shall this exile do, far away from You as he is? What shall Your servant do, tormented by love of You and yet cast off 'far from Your face'? He yearns to see You and Your countenance is too far away from him. He desires to come close to You, and Your dwelling place is inaccessible. (*Proslogion*, chapter 1)