

CHOOSING RELIGIOUS LANGUAGES **A Note on Two “Proofs” of God’s Existence**

EUGENE SAPADIN

I would like to offer a brief note on two more or less discredited attempts to prove God’s existence, and then to offer a suggestion that what goes wrong in both cases is an attempt to claim as intellectually forced what is in fact a free choice of the will; specifically, the choice to put oneself within the belief-context of a particular religious language.

1

There has been a recent (as philosophers and theologians measure time) fuss in the journals over the ontological argument, which finally died down with a general agreement that it does not work.¹ But it should have been clear to us from the start that it can’t work, since we post-Kantians don’t have the excuse that St. Anselm, the argument’s originator, had with regard to how much we can learn from analytic statements.

The argument seems to have come in two main forms, one positive and one negative. In both forms, though, we wind up with ‘God exists’ as

¹ Discussion seems to have come in two waves, both revolving around Kant’s critique of existence as a predicate. The first centrally includes Bertrand Russell’s application of his theory of definite descriptions in “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism” (1918) and G. E. Moore’s “Is Existence a Predicate”, (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supplementary Volume, 1936), and runs at least through George Nakhnikian and Wesley Salmon’s “‘Exists’ as a Predicate” (*Philosophical Review*, 1957) and William P. Alston’s “The Ontological Argument Revisited” (*Philosophical Review*, 1960). The second, mostly modal, wave opened with Norman Malcolm’s “Anselm’s Ontological Arguments” (*Philosophical Review*, 1960). Charles Harts-horne was the leading proponent of the argument through both waves.

an analytic statement, and these, as we should have remembered, can tell us nothing about the world, especially including 'existence'.

Form (A) is based on the 'fact' that God's existence includes existence, a perfect being having all attributes. But even on the questionable assumption that existence *is* a predicate (the argument over which dominated attention during the debate) this is to say that the predicate is contained in the subject, which is one of the standard definitions of 'analytic'.² Hence it says nothing about matters of fact.

The negative form (B) of the argument—which seems to have received more attention—comes from Anselm's playing with "The fool said in his heart 'There is no God' ", claiming that only a fool would try to say that God doesn't exist; that is, the statement 'God exists' is one you can't deny without self-contradiction. But this is also a definition of 'analytic'; in fact, it is sometimes said that we can't deny an analytic statement without contradiction *because* the predicate is contained in the subject. (Kant himself wasn't too clear on the relation between these criteria, nor has anyone since been.) If this is the case, then (A) and (B) are really the same argument. But in any case, each is analytic, and the thing about analytic statements is that they tell us nothing about the world.

If the argument is so obviously (ignoring the "modal" versions, which I think reduce to form (B))³ no good, what was the fascination? I would like to suggest that there really *is* something to it, but that we picked out the wrong thing. There is such a thing as religious language, which is different from everyday language. *If* we choose to speak religious language, then we can not deny the existence of God—within the

² This means that even if Norman Malcolm were correct in his claim that "Although it is an error to regard existence as a property... it does not follow that it is an error to regard necessary existence as a property", (Malcolm, "Anselm's Ontological Arguments", in Alvin Plantinga, editor, *The Ontological Argument*. London, Macmillan. 1968, p. 148), his argument would fall under the current rubric.

³ As an example of the modal versions 'reducing' to form (B), Hartshorne says that in the principle $q \supset Nq$, where q stands for ' $\exists xPx$ ' or 'Perfection exists', and N for 'it is necessarily (logically) true that', N "means analytic or *L*-true, true by necessity of the meaning of the terms employed". (Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection*, LaSalle, Open Court, 1962, reprinted in John Hick and Arthur McGill, editors, *The Many-Faced Argument*, London, Macmillan, 1968, p. 335, 337.) I think that his "analytically true, true by meanings" eventually reverts, as does Malcolm's version, to the claim that the denial of *necessary* existence to a perfect being is self-contradictory, but proof of it is beyond the scope of this discussion.

bounds of religious language, God necessarily exists.⁴ To talk religion-talk while denying God's existence would be equivalent to talking *Tempest*-talk while denying Prospero any magical power. Hence the fool, to avoid being such, should not say 'There is no God', but should avoid the subject altogether; but any time Anselm tries to tell him that the argument works to prove that there *really* is a God, he would be foolish not to reply "You've jumped languages on me."⁵

⁴ John Hick, in "A Critique of the 'Second Argument' " (Hick and McGill, *op. cit.*, pp. 341-356), rejects the argument, partly on historical grounds of Old Testament era beliefs not including logical necessity. This viewpoint, and the Christian theological one of a *deus absconditus* as a way of preserving free will, show that not all believers have accepted the argument, and that many —perhaps most— have had other grounds for their belief. Either is consistent with the thesis of this paper. What would *not* be consistent is Hick's denial of the validity of the argument. He attacks the version given by Hartshorne in *The Logic of Perfection* on the basis of a distinction between ontological and logical necessity, claiming that "Within the universe of discourse within which Hartshorne professes to be operating... one cannot treat an existential proposition as a logically necessary truth" (350), so that the necessity of Hartshorne's ' $p \supset Np$ ' is ontological, not logical; but later on, he says, the argument switches to the logical sense of ' N ', and so is invalid.

Hartshorne, as we have seen, insisted that the necessity *is* logical necessity by "the meanings of the terms employed". Hick's denial is based on the fact that the language is English, whereas Hartshorne's claim that "within the language it will be *L*-true that God exists" requires a Carnapian "artificially constructed language system... Meaning postulates perform a function within an artificial language; but Hartshorne's object is to make the ontological argument work within our natural language. No doubt it is possible to construct an artificial language for the purpose of proving the existence of God within it, or even such that the existence of God is axiomatic within it and does not need to be proved. But this would not affect the ontological argument propounded by Anselm in Latin and propounded by Hartshorne in English. If we can not prove God's existence in English, it is not clear how we should be advantaged by being able to construct an artificial language in which we *can* prove it; for it would then only be proved to those who elect to use this special language" (p. 352). If Hick were to see that 'Latin' or 'English' are not each one language, but that '*Tempest* talk' or 'Christian language' *are* separate languages, we would be in agreement. (Malcolm already is, with his Wittgensteinian "This language game is played!" (*Op. cit.* p. 153.)) As Hick says, "it would then... be proved to those who elect to use this special language".

⁵ This is probably what Hick means by saying that "the object is to make the argument work within our *natural* language". It is much clearer in Paul Heple's "Uses of the Ontological Argument" (*Philosophical Review* 1961), in which he points out that "There is nothing invalid in concluding what one has already assumed". *Soundness*, of course, is another matter.

Surprisingly, Malcolm appears to say the same thing without realizing its effect on his argument: "In those complex systems of thought, those 'language games,' God

Pascal's Wager is the attempt of a mathematician to show that it is rational to believe what can not be proved, in terms of expected payoffs. The claim is not that we can prove that God *does* exist, but can prove that the only rational behaviour is to believe that He does (and, of course, act on it).

Not only can't we prove His existence, we can know nothing at all about whether God exists. But we can either believe in Him or not. This gives us this matrix of actions and payoffs.

1	<i>God doesn't exist</i>	<i>God exists</i>
<i>Believe</i>	– (a bit)	$+\infty$
<i>Don't believe</i>	+ (a bit)	$-\infty$

If there's no God and you believe, you lose out on a few sins and Sunday morning golf; if you don't believe, you get to sin, thereby gaining whatever pleasures a sinner can. But if there *is* a God, the believer gets heaven (eternal) and the sinner hell (likewise).

Of course, there's always the claim that the believer is actually *happier* than the unbeliever —call this the Grand Inquisitor Argument, after Dostoievski— because we're all happier believing, whether it's true or not. This matrix is

2	<i>God doesn't exist</i>	<i>God exists</i>
<i>Believe</i>	+ (a bit)	$+\infty$
<i>Don't believe</i>	– (a bit)	$-\infty$

Obviously in (2) the only rational thing to do is to believe —whether or not God exists you come out ahead. But it's also rational to believe in (1), since the most you can gain by not believing is four score years or so

has the status of a necessary being. Who can doubt that? Here we must say with Wittgenstein, 'This language-game is played!' I believe that we may rightly take the existence of those religious systems of thought in which God figures as a necessary being to be a disproof of the dogma, affirmed by Hume and others, that no existential proposition can be necessary." (Malcolm in Plantinga, *op. cit.*, p. 153). The fact that there can be languages in which the game is played says nothing about jumping to 'reality-language', in which Hume's point holds. Malcolm should have remembered Wittgenstein's "The kettle can also talk —in fairy tales".

of sinning, at the risk of eternal damnation, while by believing you stand to gain much more than you can lose. If you have the choice of calling an honest coin-flip heads or tails, and if you call heads correctly you get a dime, but heads incorrectly we slit you from your guggle to your zatch and eat your gizzards in front of you, while if you call tails correctly you get a billion dollars and incorrectly you pay a two dollar fine, the only rational choice is tails.

3	<i>Heads</i>	<i>Tails</i>
<i>Call heads</i>	+ (little)	- (great)
<i>Call tails</i>	- (little)	+ (great)

I have gone into detail here because there is a problem not usually noted. The usual objection to Pascal's Wager is that God, who can't be fooled, won't let you in to heaven if you believe on these grounds. (Some go so far as to say He has a special place in hell for Pascal.) What has *not* been noticed is this. Let's say you're wondering whether or not to believe in Allah. Well.

4	<i>Allah doesn't exist</i>	<i>Allah exists</i>
<i>Believe</i>	- (little)	+∞
<i>Don't believe</i>	+ (little)	-∞

That is, if you disbelieve correctly, you get to drink alcohol, eat pork, and read Salman Rushdie with no penalty; if you believe, you miss out on these pleasures. But if Allah *does* exist, it's hell in exchange for them, or heaven for giving them up. So the only rational choice is to believe.

And how about believing in Krishna?

5	<i>Krishna doesn't exist</i>	<i>Krishna exists</i>
<i>Believe</i>	- (little)	+∞
<i>Don't believe</i>	+ (little)	- (great)

If there's no Krishna and you believe, you miss out on Big Macs, which you get by not believing. But if Krishna *does* exist, the believer gets heaven while the unbeliever (if he's eaten any cow) goes down all 86 levels of existence and has to start over. So the only rational choice is to believe in Krishna. Likewise for Apollo, where disbelief gets you turned

into a tree, while belief gets you eternity talking to the shade of Odysseus. (We can omit matrix (6).)

But one *can't* believe in God (Christian variety), Allah, Krishna, and Apollo; belief in one precludes belief in the others. To believe in Apollo is to be an idolator to a Christian, to be a Christian is automatically to be an unbeliever to a Moslem. Any argument that says the only rational choice is to believe in all of them is obviously a useless argument. Perhaps, faced with the choice, we should go with whichever gives us the best possible return (or avoids the worst—we can play maximin or minimax): thus a female could eliminate belief in Allah, since the Moslem heaven doesn't offer women as much as other heavens do; and until recently a black man could eliminate belief in a Mormon God, since blacks could not be among the 144,000 to get into heaven.⁶

This, of course, is a ridiculous way to make religious decisions. The problem goes back to the initial premise of Pascal's argument, that we can know nothing about whether God exists. Most of us would say that we know quite well that Apollo does not exist, so (6) doesn't get off the ground. Likewise, for most people who read this, Krishna and (5). The problem is, a Hindu would say the same thing about the Christian God and (1).⁷

Now we can see how this ties back to the ontological argument. There what claimed to be a proof really rested on a free choice to accept religious language. Here we see that it also matters which religious language I choose to speak. The language of the Bhagavad Gita will neither make it rational for me to believe in the Christian trinity nor give me an absolutely perfect being whose essence includes existence. So while nothing can be proved without choice, if I decide to speak in a

⁶ Antony Flew (*God and Philosophy*, London, Hutchinson, 1966, pp. 184–87) is aware of the problem of alternate "hell-consigning Gods". His suggestion is that the Pascalian "prudent punter" should bet on the most probable, rather than using minimax/maximin considerations.

⁷ Flew (*op. cit.*) says that the "radical agnosticism" of Pascal's first premise—"reason can decide nothing here"—means that there are an *infinite* number of *possible* hell-consigning Gods, and for any one who saves a particular set of believers and damns all others there will be one who damns all and only those particular believers (p. 186). From this he feels that what follows "would surely be a total practical discounting of all such theoretical possibilities" (p. 187).

As long as the reference class is infinite and his bet is on *probabilities*, he is right; the probability of any of those possibilities is vanishingly small. That is one reason for a prudent punter's only option being to play minimax/maximin.

Christian context,⁸ it makes no sense to deny God's existence, and is rational to believe in it.

This may be what the New Theology —and the best of the old— has been trying to say when it claims, in its own language, that belief is a matter of faith, not reason; for it is not reason which decided whether or not to accept religious language —or which religious language to accept⁹— at the start.

Wolfson College, Oxford

Johnson State College (Vermont)

⁸ Once the choice is freely made, the *deus absconditus* ceases to exist. Proponents of the ontological argument seem to see this through a glass darkly. It may be what Anselm had in mind when he introduced his argument with "...unless I believed, I should not understand"; and when in response to Gaunilo's reply on behalf of the fool he says "...seeing that the author... is a Catholic speaking in behalf of the fool, I think it sufficient that I answer the Catholic" (*Anselm's Basic Writings*, translated by S. N. Deane, Lasalle, Open Court, 1962; second edition).

Likewise Malcolm's "At a deeper level, I suspect that the argument can be thoroughly understood only by one... who views it from the *inside* not just from the outside and who has, therefore, at least some inclination to *partake* in that religious form of life" (Malcolm in Plantinga, *op. cit.*, p. 159). Here he is saying, not only that the choice is antecedent to the proof, but that you must choose a *particular* religion: "...*that* religious form of life", not *the* religious form of life.

Contemporary American fundamentalists, with their stress on Jesus Christ, probably have not chosen to speak the language of an Absolutely Perfect Being.

⁹ Flew (*op. cit.*) approaches this point, then backs away: "Only if some good reason can be found to limit the range of betting options can the... wager argument ...have any force at all" (p. 186). But instead of limiting through choice, he argues immediately into the radical agnosticism "reason can decide nothing here" move.

It is unclear to what extent reason is involved in rejecting the Apollo option, or if we think it is involved at all in rejecting the Allah option; and the questions are fascinating. But in any case, *once* the choice is made to accept or reject *this* God, the argument 'works', albeit with the same problems about jumping to reality as the ontological argument. The trouble for Pascal as a Catholic is not, as Flew says, that the Wager argument gives *no* conclusions; rather it is that it gives too many conclusions, one for each initial choice.