

Lowe on 'The Ontological Argument'

I am a naturalist: I hold that natural reality exhausts causal reality. Since I am a naturalist, I am committed to the claim that there are no successful arguments against naturalism.

Theists claim that God is the cause—creator, ground, source, origin—of causal reality. Thus, theists are committed to the denial of naturalism; and naturalists are committed to the denial of theism. In particular, given that I am committed to the claim that there are no successful arguments against naturalism, I am committed to the claim that there are no successful arguments for the existence of God. Hence, I am committed to the claim that there are no successful ontological arguments for the existence of God.

I do not claim that it is *certain* that naturalism is true. Rather, I give very high credence to the claim that naturalism is true. But, given that I assign very high credence to the claim that naturalism is true, I give very low credence to the claim that there are successful arguments against naturalism. In consequence, I give very low credence to the claim that there are successful arguments for the existence of God; and, *a fortiori*, I give very low credence to the claim that there are successful ontological arguments for the existence of God.

How do we determine whether arguments are successful? In the context of evaluation of the relative merits of naturalism and theism, we imagine a dialogue between proponents of the two views. (Perhaps we can think of these proponents as embodiments or personifications of the two views.) The overall aim of the dialogue is to try to reach consensus about which of the two views scores best across the full range of theoretical virtues: simplicity, scope, coherence, evidential fit, predictive power, and so forth. While there are many different aspects to the dialogue—sharing information, clarifying points of detail, and so forth—we are here primarily interested in the role that might be played by the introduction of arguments. That is, we are interested in parts of the dialogue that involve moves with the following form:

Proponent: 'P₁, ..., P_n, therefore C'

Since those who put forward ontological arguments intend to put forward arguments in which the conclusion is a logical consequence of the premises, we can here confine our attention to those kinds of arguments.

What is the purpose of making a move like this in the dialogue? The proponent of an argument (of which that proponent supposes that the conclusion is a logical consequence of the premises) is implicitly claiming that there is a logical contradiction in the view held by the other party in the dialogue, and is explicitly claiming that that logical contradiction is due to the other party's acceptance of the premises and lack of acceptance of the conclusion of the given argument. (Recall that C is a logical consequence of P₁, ..., P_n, just in case {P₁, ..., P_n, ~C} is inconsistent.) Thus, minimum conditions on success for an argument of this kind—apart from the requirement that the conclusion is indeed a logical consequence of the premises—are (i) that the premises are all accepted by the other party to the argument, and (ii) that the conclusion of the argument is not accepted by the other party to the argument.

If an argument is not *now* successful because the other party to the argument does not accept one or more of the premises, it remains open that the argument could become successful in the future (if the other party were to change their mind about the relevant premises). Hence, in particular, if the proponent of the argument is able to find successful arguments for the relevant premises, then those new arguments could be ‘put together’ with the currently unsuccessful argument to yield a successful argument. However, one should not make the mistake of confusing *potential* success with success: an argument that has premises that are not accepted by the other party to the debate is just an unsuccessful argument¹.

Given the way that I have characterised arguments—as collections of premises and conclusions—it should come as no surprise to learn that I do not believe that there is any such thing as ‘the ontological argument’. Rather, there are many ontological arguments—that is, many arguments that roughly fit the following characterisation: they have as their conclusion the claim that God exists, or something that is (perhaps incorrectly) supposed by proponents to entail that God exist, and their premises include only claims that are (perhaps incorrectly) supposed by proponents to be both necessary and knowable *a priori*. In Oppy (1996), I provided a taxonomy of six major families of ontological arguments; in Oppy (2006), I noted that there are further families that went unnoticed in that original taxonomy.

I claim that detailed examination of all the ontological arguments that have hitherto been produced bears out the claim that no one has yet produced a successful ontological argument: that is, no one has produced an ontological argument that succeeds in establishing that naturalism is logically inconsistent. I claim, further, that the ontological arguments that have been produced to date fail in a wide variety of different ways. (There are many different ways in which conclusions can fail to be logical consequences of their premises. There are many different claims that have been premises in ontological arguments that have been produced to date, and there are many different reasons why naturalists reject one or another of those claims.) Finally—although I have not always held this view—I claim that there is no successful naturalist argument for the conclusion that the claim that someone will produce a successful ontological argument in the future should be given *zero* credence. Of course, given that naturalists suppose that naturalism has very high credence, naturalists suppose that theism has very low credence (and thus, *a fortiori*, naturalists suppose that the claim that someone will produce a successful ontological argument in the future has even lower credence)—but I see no reason why naturalists need to suppose that they have successful arguments for the claim that there will never be successful ontological arguments.

In this chapter, I am going to examine the discussion of ‘the ontological argument’ in Lowe (2007). I have not taken up Lowe’s discussion elsewhere. I propose to argue that ‘the argument’ that Lowe looks favourably upon is not successful.

¹ Perhaps it might be said: that someone fails to accept a premise hardly suffices to show that it is rationally permissible for them to fail to accept that premise. Of course, this is true. But we should be sceptical of the claim that it is rationally impermissible for someone to fail to accept a given premise unless we can give that person a successful argument that has the premise in question as its conclusion. (Part of the point of entering into debate is to move beyond the position of labelling people ‘irrational’ with no justification beyond the fact of disagreement.)

1

In the course of his discussion, Lowe gives a number of different arguments which he takes to be trivial reformulations of one another. While I think that there are significant differences between the arguments that Lowe examines, I propose to focus initial attention on what I take to be the ‘core’ argument that Lowe endorses:

1. It is possible that there is an absolutely independent being. (Premise)
2. Necessarily, if there is an absolutely independent being, then it is necessary that there is an absolutely independent being. (Premise)
3. (Hence) There is an absolutely independent being. (From 1, 2, by modal logic)
4. (Hence) God exists. (From 3, by definition of ‘God’.)

First, let us consider this argument from the standpoint of theism, i.e. from the standpoint of the proponent of the argument in our dialogue. Suppose that theism says that there is just one necessarily existent and essentially absolutely independent causal agent upon which the existence of all else necessarily depends. If theism says this, then, by the lights of theism, the argument from 1-3 is sound: the premises are true, and the conclusion follows logically from the premises. As Lowe notes, there is a question about the inference of 4 from 3; as things stand, there is nothing in the premises that entails that there is just one absolutely independent being. Perhaps, though, this is not hard to fix:

1. It is possible that there is exactly one absolutely independent being, (Premise)
2. Necessarily, if there is exactly one absolutely independent being, then it is necessary that there is exactly *that* one absolutely independent being. (Premise)
3. (Hence) There is exactly one absolutely independent being. (From 1, 2)
4. (Hence) God exists. (From 3, by definition of ‘God’.)

With this revision, the argument from 1-4 will be judged sound by theists who suppose that God is the one necessarily existent and essentially absolutely independent causal agent. (Of course, not all theists accept this conception of God. But we can suppose that the theist in our dialogue does.)

It is worth noting that our theist accepts the following claim about metaphysical possibility: all metaphysically possible worlds have the same origin—each metaphysically possible world issues from the same initial, essentially absolutely independent source. Moreover, plausibly, our theist is further committed to the claim that differences between worlds emerge either as a result of brute contingent initial² differences—the essentially absolutely independent source has different initial properties in different worlds—or else as a result of the outworking of objective chance³.

² ‘Initial’? Initial in the order of dependency! I take it that naturalists suppose that the order of dependency just is the causal order. Perhaps theists also make this supposition; if not, no matter, the supposition plays no role in the subsequent discussion.

³ I assume that, if there are libertarian free actions, then those are objectively chancy. Those who disagree with me about this will wish to list at least one further way in which differences between possible worlds can emerge.

Second, we turn to consider the argument from the standpoint of naturalism, i.e. from the standpoint of the other participant in our dialogue. From the outset, we can suppose that our naturalist accepts the same *kind* of view about metaphysical possibility that is accepted by our theist: either all metaphysically possible worlds ‘overlap’ with an initial segment of the actual world, or else all metaphysically possible worlds share an initial ‘source’ which has brute contingent properties. Moreover, from the outset, we can also suppose that our naturalist accepts that differences between worlds emerge either as a result of those brute contingent initial differences, or else as a result of the outworking of objective chance.⁴

Any naturalist who supposes that it is impossible for there to be an infinite regress and who accepts the above account of metaphysical possibility will suppose that the initial state of natural reality constitutes an essentially absolutely independent source for natural reality⁵. That is: any naturalist who supposes that it is impossible for there to be an infinite regress, and who accepts that all metaphysically possible worlds have the same origin as the actual world will accept that the origin of natural reality is an absolutely independent being. But, of course, a naturalist who supposes that every metaphysically possible world originates in the same natural state as the actual world does not thereby suppose that God exists. A key difference between naturalism and theism is that naturalists suppose that agency and consciousness are late and local features of reality, whereas theists suppose that agency and consciousness are initial features of reality. If agency and consciousness do not figure in our definition of ‘God’, we risk applying the name to something that does not deserve to bear it.

I take it that our naturalist need not be committed to the existence of exactly one absolutely independent being. Our naturalist will suppose that, if there is an infinite regress, then there is no absolutely independent being—and, *a fortiori*, that it is not possible that there is exactly one absolutely independent being. If our naturalist is undecided between ‘infinite regress’ and ‘necessary initial state’, then our naturalist will be undecided whether there is exactly one absolutely independent being. But our naturalist will also note that the argument that the theist is propounding provides no assistance at all in the resolution of that indecision.

Some naturalists might also be undecided about, or opposed to, the theory of metaphysical possibility that I have attributed to my naturalist. Those naturalists will reject the second premise of the argument; they will suppose that reality might have a purely contingent origin, if, indeed, it has an origin at all. Such an origin would be ‘absolutely independent’ in the sense that it would not depend upon anything else; but it would not be ‘absolutely independent’ in the sense of being ‘non-contingent’. Again, a naturalist who took this line would be able to note that the argument that our theist propounds provides no assistance at all in the choice between ‘infinite regress’,

⁴ Like his theistic opponent, our naturalist supposes that many ordinary judgments about ‘possibility’ are actually judgments about ‘epistemic’ or ‘doxastic’ possibility. In particular, on this account of metaphysical possibility, it often turns out that judgements about conceivability are only good guides to ‘epistemic’ or ‘doxastic’ possibility.

⁵ In section three of paper, I shall give a reasonably detailed consideration of the senses in which a naturalist can suppose that the initial state of natural reality involves an absolutely independent being.

‘necessary origin with no contingent features’, ‘necessary origin with contingent features’, and ‘contingent origin’.⁶

In short: the ontological argument that I formulated at the beginning of this section is plainly not a successful argument. While it is true that (some) theists will suppose that the argument is sound, it seems to me that naturalists can reasonably say that they are prepared to grant both of the premises of the argument if and only if they further suppose that natural reality has an origin that is an absolutely independent *natural* being.

2

After setting out ‘the ontological argument’, Lowe provides responses to ‘well-known objections’ (334). In particular, Lowe argues that ‘the ontological argument’ is not properly criticisable on the grounds that it simply defines God into existence (337), nor on the grounds that existence is not a real predicate (335), nor on the grounds that it is vulnerable to Gaunilo’s ‘perfect island’ objection (334).

I am happy to grant to Lowe that the particular ontological argument that is set out in the first section of this paper is not vulnerable to any of these three objections. However, I deny that the same is true of some of the other arguments that Lowe sets out in his paper—arguments that, as I noted above, Lowe claims are ‘versions’ of ‘the ontological argument’. Consider, for example, the following ‘version’, Lowe’s reconstruction of Anselm’s *Proslogion II* argument:

1. A being than which no greater (being) can be conceived exists at least in the mind. (Premise)
2. It is greater to exist in reality than to exist only in the mind. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) A being than which no greater (being) can be conceived exists not only in the mind but also in reality. (From 1, 2)
4. (Therefore) God exists. (From 3, by definition of ‘God’.)

Against *this* argument, it seems to me that we should join with Gaunilo in asking proponents to explain why the following argument is not equally cogent:

1. An island than which no greater island can be conceived exists at least in the mind. (Premise)
2. It is greater to exist in reality than to exist only in the mind. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) An island than which no greater island can be conceived exists not only in the mind but also in reality. (From 1, 2)
4. (Therefore) The Blessed Isle exists. (From 3, by definition of ‘The Blessed Isle’)

⁶ Of course, there are also naturalists who eschew—or abhor—the kind of metaphysics implicit in the foregoing discussion. Naturalists who are undecided about, or opposed to, metaphysical understandings of causation, modality, dependence and so forth can still take away something from this discussion. For them, the lesson is that they could reconsider their indecision about—or opposition to—metaphysical understandings of causation, modality, dependence, and so forth without thereby incurring a commitment to reconsider their rejection of theism.

Surely our naturalist can quite correctly observe that: (i) the argument attributed to Anselm is valid just in case the argument attributed to Gaunilo is valid; and (ii) that, at least by the lights of naturalists, there is nothing that speaks more heavily in favour of the first premise of the argument attributed to Anselm than in favour of the first premises of the argument attributed to Gaunilo. But, if that's right, then surely we can conclude that, on the supposition that the argument that is attributed to Gaunilo is not successful, the argument attributed to Anselm is also not successful. And who would wish to say that the argument attributed to Gaunilo is successful?

It is surely right to say—as Lowe insists—that an island than which no greater can be conceived would not be—and, indeed, could not be—an absolutely independent being, whereas a being than which no greater can be conceived would be an absolutely independent being. But a naturalist who wishes to endorse Gaunilo's objection to Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument can accept this point with equanimity. For—as is evident to inspection—the claim that a being than which no greater can be conceived would be an absolutely independent being plays no role at all in Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument. A naturalist can insist that existence is great-making for *beings* just in case existence is great-making for *islands* while also accepting that only beings other than islands can be absolutely independent.

It is no less evidently right to say that a naturalist could not sensibly think to make the same claim about the ontological argument discussed in section one above. The argument

1. It is possible that there is exactly one absolutely independent island. (Premise)
2. Necessarily, if there is exactly one absolutely independent island, then it is necessary that there is exactly *that* one absolutely independent island. (Premise)
3. (Hence) There is exactly one absolutely independent island. (From 1, 2)

is manifestly less cogent than the argument that we discussed in our first section, because the first premise in the parallel argument is obviously less plausible than the first premise in the original argument. But there is no surprise in this: there are very different things to say about different arguments.⁷

A better 'parallel' for the revised version of the argument presented in the first section of this paper might be thought to be something like the following:

1. It is possible that there is exactly one absolutely independent being, (Premise)
2. Necessarily, if there is exactly one absolutely independent being, then it is necessary that there is exactly *that* one absolutely independent being. (Premise)
3. (Hence) There is exactly one absolutely independent being. (From 1, 2)
4. (Hence) There is exactly one absolutely independent natural being. (From 3, assuming naturalism.)

⁷ Should we go on to say that Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument goes wrong because it supposes that existence is a great-making property (and that, in turn, this is wrong because existence is not a real predicate)? I don't think so; however, here is not the place to try to develop an argument in support of this contention.

However, it seems to me even better to say that there is no reason to look for ‘parallels’ to the argument discussed in the first section of this paper, since there is no reason to suppose that naturalists need to object to the central part of that argument. Gaunilo’s strategy is attractive only in cases where its deployment plausibly shows that something is wrong with a target argument in circumstances in which it is hard to pinpoint the precise fault in that target argument. The argument discussed in the first section of this paper is not an instance of that kind of argument.

3

No doubt some who read this paper will think that it is incredible to suppose that naturalists could accept that there is an absolutely independent being. Lowe himself provides an argument that might be taken to establish this point:

Even within the most fundamental category of substance, there are degrees of being, because there are degrees of existential dependence. Consider, for instance, something such as a pile or heap of rocks. ... The pile evidently depends for its existence on the individual rocks that make it up—whereas they do not, conversely, depend for their existence on it. In that sense, the pile is a more dependent being than is any of the rocks that compose it. However, the rocks in turn depend for their existence on other things, most obviously the various mineral particles of which they themselves are composed.

It would seem that all material substances are, very plausibly, dependent beings in this sense, even if some turn out to be simple substances, not composed of anything further. For it seems that they are all *contingent* beings, where a contingent being is one that does not exist of necessity. Consider, for example, a single elementary particle of physics, such as a certain individual electron, *e*, which is, according to the current physical theory, not composed of anything more fundamental. Surely, *e* might not have existed at all. But could *e* have been the only thing to exist? We might think that we can imagine a world in which that exists is this single electron *e*. But, in fact, modern physics would repudiate this idea as nonsensical. Electrons are not really to be thought of as being ‘particles’ in a commonsense way, but are, rather, best thought of as quantized states of a space-permeating field; and according to this way of thinking of them, it really makes no sense to envisage one of them as having an existence that is wholly independent of anything else.

However, even though it makes no sense to think of an electron, or indeed any ‘material substance’, as having such a wholly independent existence, we clearly can make sense of the idea of a being that does have such an existence: a being that depends for its existence, in any sense whatsoever, on absolutely nothing other than itself. (332, italics in original)

Consider natural reality. It is plausible naturalistic metaphysical speculation that *it* could not have failed to exist. Suppose that natural reality has an origin—i.e. suppose that there is not an infinite regress of states of natural reality. There are two simple

hypotheses that we might frame about that origin⁸. On the one hand, that origin might involve a single, simple substance. On the other hand, that origin might involve a single substance that is composed of other substances. In this latter case, on the assumption that there is no infinite regress, the single substance is ultimately composed of many simple substances.

If the origin involves a single, simple substance, then we have a being that is in every sense absolutely independent: it exists of necessity, it has no parts, it does not depend for its identity on anything else⁹, and so forth. If, on the other hand, the origin involves a single substance that is composed of other substances, then matters are more complicated. Perhaps there are many beings that are in every sense absolutely independent: they exist of necessity, have no parts, do not depend for their identity on anything else, and so forth; or perhaps there are some beings among them that are not quite absolutely independent in every sense, because they depend for their identity upon the others. Moreover, perhaps the ‘largest’ being is one that is not quite absolutely independent because, even though it exists of necessity, and does not depend for its identity upon anything else, it does have parts; or perhaps the ‘largest’ being is one that is even further from being absolutely independent because, even though it exists of necessity, it both has parts and depends for its identity upon those parts; and so on.¹⁰

More carefully, then, our naturalist can say the following: If natural reality has an origin, then that origin—the initial state of natural reality—*might* exist of necessity, have no parts, and not depend for its identity upon anything else.¹¹ If natural reality has an origin with all three of these properties, then, plausibly, natural reality has an origin that is absolutely independent in every sense. Of course, even if natural reality has an origin that exists of necessity and that does not depend upon anything else for its identity, it is highly speculative to suppose that that origin has no parts. But, from the naturalist point of view, it doesn’t really matter whether, if there is an origin, that origin has parts: the more important aspects of ontological independence are necessity of existence and identity independence. Moreover, even if natural reality has an origin that exists of necessity, it is also speculative to suppose that the identity of that origin does not depend upon the parts of that origin. But, again, from the naturalist point of view, it doesn’t really matter whether, if there is an origin, the identity of that origin is independent of the parts of that origin: the most important aspect of ontological independence is necessity of existence. And, of course, as we noted before, the naturalist will in any case hold that it is speculative to suppose that natural reality has an origin, and not less speculative to suppose that, if natural reality has an origin, then it has a necessarily existent origin. However—these recent considerations notwithstanding—the important point upon which the naturalist insists is that, if the naturalist were to grant the various assumptions that are needed in order to justify the claim that there is an absolutely independent being, then the naturalist would also

⁸ For the purposes of this discussion, I ignore more complex hypotheses that one might frame about the origin of natural reality.

⁹ For the notion of identity-dependence—and for very useful clarification of different conceptions of ontological dependence—see Lowe (2009).

¹⁰ It is probably worth pointing out that, if there is an initial state of natural reality, that initial state will not contain electrons (nor any other ‘elementary particles’). On well-established models of our universe, electrons are not present in the very earliest stages of our universe—and, on many current cosmological models, there are parts of natural reality that are antecedent to our universe.

¹¹ Of course, the ‘might’ in this sentence is epistemic or doxastic: it is not metaphysical.

justifiably insist that that absolutely independent being is the initial natural part of natural reality.

Despite the foregoing remarks, I don't dispute everything that Lowe says in the above quotation. Thus, for example, I think that naturalists can—and should—agree that the range of contingency for material objects *may* be very extensive even if natural reality has a necessarily existent origin. In particular, as I have argued elsewhere¹², I think that naturalists should accept that all non-initial states have causes, and that all non-initial objects have causes of their existence. However, if objective chance is widespread, then the dependence, of many—or most, or nearly all, or perhaps even all—non-initial states and objects on an original state and whatever objects it involves, would not be a matter of metaphysical necessitation. But, clearly, even if all of this is accepted, it remains open to naturalists to insist that *not all* material substances are contingent beings—and, in particular, that the initial part of natural reality is not a contingent being.

4

On the basis of the preceding discussion, I conclude that Lowe's ontological arguments are unsuccessful. Moreover, as I noted initially, there are no more successful ontological arguments that have been produced to date. And there is no reason to suppose that there are hitherto undiscovered successful ontological arguments: if anything, what evidence there is points in the other direction. (If there is a successful ontological argument, why is it still undiscovered, given the huge amount of time and effort that have been invested in devising arguments of this kind?) However, as I also noted earlier, there is no particularly strong reason to suppose that it is *certain* that we shall never have a successful ontological argument—and nor is there any reason to suppose that our just-noted historical point can be parlayed into a successful argument for the conclusion that there are no successful ontological arguments.

Elsewhere, I have argued that what goes for ontological arguments also goes for other arguments about the existence of God: there are no successful arguments on either side of the dispute between naturalists and theists.¹³ That's not to say that I deny that there are local areas where one view has a clear advantage over the other: for example, I hold that, when it comes to the question of why there is something rather than nothing, naturalism has a clear advantage over theism¹⁴. But naturalism and theism—when fully elaborated—are comprehensive theories; in consequence, comparison of their virtues is a more or less intractable task. A successful deductive argument would clearly suffice to break the deadlock; and, in part, this may help to explain why there are still some who persist in constructing and offering purported ontological proofs for the existence of God (and others who persist in constructing and offering logical arguments from evil that would be proofs of the non-existence of God). However, if I am right, those people could all find more profitable ways to spend their time.

References

¹² See Oppy (2010).

¹³ See Oppy (2006).

¹⁴ See Oppy (forthcoming) for the details.

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