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MALCOLM'S VERSION OF THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT: SEVERAL QUESTIONABLE ASPECTS

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This article deals with the version of the ontological argument (OA) for existence of God proposed by Malcolm and Hartshorne. The study has three aims: to outline the role of *de re* modality in the OA, to reinvestigate the *de re* / *de dicto* distinction, and to reflect on the possibility of an *a priori* proof of the existence. The article analyses two logical formulations of the argument, points out some formal features of *de re* modality relevant to its validity, and proposes another approach to the formalization of *de re*. We demonstrate that the prevailing way does not represent the essential features of *de re* and, therefore, cannot be effective with respect to the argument. Further, we substantiate the thesis that most contemporary proofs of existence are vague. We conclude that a more precise distinction between modalities *de re* and *de dicto* makes Malcolm's version of the ontological argument (as well as its improved version proposed by Hartshorne) unsound.

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Keywords: ontological argument, modalities *de re* and *de dicto*, Norman Malcolm, necessary existence, possible worlds semantics

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Introduction

Malcolm [5] puts forward the idea that there are two different versions of the ontological argument (OA) in Anselm's *Proslogion*. While the second chapter proves the mere existence of God, the third chapter proves the *necessity* of God's existence. The proof contained in *Proslogion II* is widely known, it was repeatedly debated by medieval scholastics and finally "ruined" by Kant. However, Malcolm proposed a new version of OA derived from *Proslogion III*. He referred to it as to the "Modal Ontological Argument" (MOA). A few years later Alvin Plantinga reformulated it in terms of the possible worlds semantics. As a result of that reassessment there has been a growing interest in MOA among contemporary analytical philosophers and theologians[3]. The main concern of these studies are two principal questions: 1) could *existence* and *necessary existence* be considered as first-order predicates and 2) is it trouble-free to reduce *de re* to *de dicto* (and vice versa).

Presently Kant's idea that existence is not a real predicate and that it adds nothing to the content of a concept is commonly accepted. However, this idea does not destroy all versions of the OA. Time and again philosophers try to break Kant's spell. Malcolm also made such an attempt. He argued that Kant's criticism of the argument is quite misleading, since the question is not whether *existence* is a predicate but whether *necessary existence* is a predicate. Stating the essence of Malcolm's ideas in contemporary terms, the concept of *necessary existence* is a modal one, unlike the concept of *mere– existence.* Therefore within the possible worlds framework, which obviously was not available to Kant, the former (but not the later) *can* be interpreted as a specific cross-world predicate.

Unfortunately, Malcolm's approach is unsuccessful, largely because his version of the argument suffers from several formal faults, which are discussed below. A number of authors have concentrated on the question of modalities and stressed some principal problems connected with modal predication[4]. At the same time little attention is paid to the fact that the validity of any modal proof of existence is strictly correlated with the *de re / de dicto* distinction. The point is that if necessary existence is indeed a property, it has to be captured with *de re* predication, else – with *de dicto*.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we reconstruct and briefly analyse Malcom's and Hartshorne's versions of the argument. Second, we offer an investigation of the obstacles. Third, we mark several new problems of the MOA. Namely, 1) Malcolm's logical formalism has

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[3] See Tichy[9], [10] Allen [1], Henle [4].
[4] See Plantinga [8], Tichy [9], [10], Allen [1], Kane [6].

an inadequate treatment of *de re* modality; 2) in terms of possible world semantics God has to be considered as a *designated abstract object*, whose existence we still do not know how to prove.

1. Malcolm's Version

Malcolm pointed out the second version of the ontological argument,

"God is that, than which nothing greater can be conceived.… And [God] assuredly exists so truly, that it cannot be conceived not to exist. For, it is possible to conceive of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist; and this is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, can be conceived not to exist, it is not that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this is an irreconcilable contradiction. There is, then, so truly a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist; and this being thou are, O Lord, our God". [*Proslogion III*]

Malcolm did not offer his own version of the ontological argument. He claims that he just paraphrases Anselm in the language of contemporary philosophy. Using mostly purely philosophical speculations rather than rigorous logical constructions, Malcolm comes to the formulation of evidence, which can be reconstructed as follows:

1) God is a being a greater than which cannot be conceived.   Df
2) God is an unlimited being.   Df
3) The existence of a being is impossible iff the being is contradictory.   Axiom
4) God is not a contradictory being.   Assumption
5) A being which came into existence either was *caused* to come into existence or has *happened* to come into existence.   Assumption
6) A being which either was *caused* to come into existence or has *happened* to come into existence is a limited being.   (5)
7) If God does not exist He cannot begin to exist.   (1, 2, 6)
8) If God does not exist He necessarily does not exist.   (7)
9) If God exists then He cannot neither begin nor cease to exist.   (2, 6)
10) If God exists He necessarily exists.   (9)
11) God's existence either necessary or impossible.   (8, 10)
12) God necessarily exists.   (3, 4, 11)

There are some problems here. Firstly, the assumption (4) is questionable: why is it true that God is not a contradictory being? It is easy to conceive that God is contradictory and, then, non-existent. Another problematic point is (12). The proof goes all the way with the modality *de*

dicto, it argues that the fact of God's existence *is necessary* [*His existence is necessary*]. However, the conclusion is committed to the modality *de re* – it claims that God *must* exist [*He necessarily exists*]. Such a transformation of modality seems to be analytical but it is not. In fact, it is illicit, since *de re* modality is about necessary things, while *de dicto* is about the necessary truth of statements. Kant is very precise and briefly expresses this idea: "But the unconditioned necessity of a judgment does not form the absolute necessity of a thing" [7: 345].

Malcolm's main idea is following. While existence is not perfection, a necessary existence is. In other words, existence is not a real predicate (and escapes the criticism of Kant), while necessary existence is real. This assumption is grounded on the understanding that God is traditionally one who has no restrictions. And, if so, he must be conceived as unlimited in terms of his existence. From the fact that God is absolutely unlimited in respect of his existence, it should follow in that God cannot be in time, being solely infinite. To be in no way limited, God must be eternal. Only allegations of eternity exclude any idea of the duration, which is essential, because "if a thing has duration then it would be merely a *contingent* fact, if it was a fact, that its duration was endless" [5: 48].

Hartshorne's Version

The structure of the ontological argument is simple and straightforward. However, not everyone who is acquainted with the argument has been converted. The same can be said about its modal version. MOA resumed disputes among analytical philosophers. These researchers, who concede the modal version of the argument, endeavour to demonstrate its clearness. Already in 1961, Hartshorne tried to formalize Malcolm's reasoning. The proof acquired the following form:

1) $\exists x P(x) \supset \Box \exists x P(x)$ Definition of God's existence[5]

2) $\neg \Box \exists x P(x) \supset \neg \Box \neg \exists x P(x)$ Axiom

3) $\neg \Box \neg \exists x P(x) \supset \Box \neg \exists x P(x)$ (1, contraposition for $\Box$)

4) $\Box \exists x P(x) \vee \Box \neg \exists x P(x)$ (2, 3, The Principle of excluded middle)

5) $\neg \Box \neg \exists x P(x)$ Assumption

6) $\Box \exists x P(x)$ (4,5, modus tollendo-ponens)

Hartshorne, like Malcolm, concedes that assumption (5) is the most doubtful point of the proof. Here the modality does not change from *de dicto* to *de re.* It is good for the argument as a whole, but it is not good for the proof of God's necessary possession of a property. It is clearly seen that the proof operates only using the existential quantifier ($\exists$), and not existence

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[5] Here *P* stands for "God exists".

predicate (E). This is a direct indication that existence cannot be understood in this case as a predicate. The quantifier expresses a property inherent in another property and not the property itself. Hence, it is clear that box ($\Box$) is not attributed to the quantifier, and the entire expression as a whole, i.e. we are not talking about the necessary existence of the being, but only the necessary assertion that there is some *being* with some perfection.

Furthermore, Hartshorne claims that axiom (2) is self-evident. He explains its meaning as follows: "Modal status, in the absolute logical sense, is always necessary", and calls it a "fairly standard axiom in modal logic" [3: 471]. However, this is not a "fairly standard" axiom for any modal system. More precisely, it is standard only for modal system *S5* by Lewis. Intuitively, this is not the most clear modal system. Nevertheless, this system is typically has taken for the modal ontological proof. It occurs because *S5* by Lewis is very convenient, since the relation of accessibility in this model is reflexive, symmetric and transitive at the same time. This set of properties makes the proof of necessity extremely practical. Unfortunately, such a proof is always based on the modality *de dicto* and never *de re*.

2. Criticism

Allen [1] examines the main problems of Malcolm's version of the proof. This analysis is precisely straightforward and obvious and indicates some important problems. The foremost are the following, firstly, the semantic status of the term "God" remains unclear. It can be understood as a logical proper name, as a proper name or as a predicate. Each alternative leads to complication and opacity, which only muddles the proof as a whole. Secondly, *de re* and *de dicto* modalities are not interchangeable as straightforwardly as Malcolm claims. Lastly, if the existence is not a predicate, then the necessary existence is not a predicate. For our study the last two ideas are the crucial. We extend and expand these matters in the section 4.

Henle [4] also criticises Malcolm going in a different, less strict, direction than Allen. He considers only terminological and ontological questions that are not directly relate to the structure of the proof. Henle focuses on the obstacle of interpretation of the term "necessary" and the problems, arising in connection with this issue. This issue is largely resolved by dint of possible world semantics, where the definition of necessity is given by strict formal matter. However, the concept of necessity still needs a clarification.

Dragalina-Chernaya in a series of papers[6] looks for a new approach to the treatment of the Ontological Argument. In scholastic tradition, she has called it a middle way. She examines the OA and comes to conclusion that it is a performative proof. Performative proof is a proof which

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[6] See, e.g., [11] and [12].

is working only in the process of its spelling. In other words, the performative proof is "not [a] transition from some true statements to the others, but it is a transition from some sound actions to another, thereby is receiving their validity" [11: 171]. From a logical point of view, no performative proof is a proof, but its result is the desired status – the belief in God. Thus, the proof has transferred from the domain of logic to the domain of volition. If we want to understand performative proof, we have to forget about straightforward logic reasons and have to make endeavour of thinking. Everyone who will make truly endeavour, then will understand that God exists. If somebody does not believe in God, it will just means that he (or she) did not try hard enough. However, this method of solving the problem is not suitable for analytical philosophers, who are looking for solutions in the domain of logic.

3. Some New but Old Problems

One obvious problem is that of *de re* modality[7]. The problem is more complicated than usual. The point is that contemporary modal logic deals with a lighter version of *de re* modality. It considers the statements of the form $\exists x \Box G(x)$ as *de re*. At the same time, OA has to be analysed within the context of medieval logic, where *de re* modality has another sense. For any medieval philosopher (and/or theologian) $\exists x \Box G(x)$ is not *de re*, but *de dicto*. Also in 1984 Markin [13] describes the situation in modal logic as an inadequate analogue of *de re* in the traditional sense. In traditional sense, *de re* attributes the necessity directly to objects. It is hardly consistent with the contemporary analytical approach to the analysis of reasoning. However, if we intend to prove the existence of God, we have to show that he exists necessarily. In other words, it is not required to show that $\exists x \Box G(x)$. It is more difficult and important to prove something like $ExG(\Box x)$ or at least $\exists xG(\Box x)$. However, contemporary modal logic deals with assertions, not with objects. No object can be necessary or possible. At the same time, MOA requires a demonstration of the necessity of God's existence. Thus, currently there is a necessity to create a new formalization for the old medieval ontology. Unfortunately, the problem of formalization of *de re* modality currently looks like Columbus, who is constantly traveling to India, but is arriving at the coast of America over and over again.

Another important problem is *to prove the existence*. This is extremely strange. For any other object (just not for God), this problem has never arisen in a rational sense. Why is it needed it? And what is more important: how can it be proved? As a rule, the question of the existence has an empirical answer (which Kant indicates, when denying existence as a real predicate). If

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[7] This problem is closely linked to another problem: the problem of existence as a predicate. Those, who accept Malcolm's and/or Hartshorne's MOA (Modal Ontological Argument), inevitably caught between Scylla and Charybdis: to show that existence is not a real predicate, and at the same time to prove that some being (God) exists. The point is that the latter is impossible without the former.

we are talking about an abstract (not corporeal) object, then the question about its existence in the usual sense does not arise. God is a designated object. Furthermore, if he is such object, then a new question arises: in which sense he is an abstract object. Nevertheless, if our goal is to prove his existence, we have to demonstrate it by non-empirical methods. Actually, an attempt to prove the existence *logically* is such method. However, Kant's criticism opposes any non-empirical attempts to demonstrate the existence of any object, including abstract ones. So, theologians are in a precarious position. On the one hand, it is obvious that in all other cases they do not need to prove the existence of an object non-empirically; on the other hand, in the case of the existence of God, they are forced to do so. Thereby, the primary task in this case is to justify a non-empirical method. This justification is provided by the fact that God is a designated object. However, it is not as obvious as we would like. If an object is designated, it is not enough to argue the necessity for proof of its existence. As a rule, there is an opposite situation: if an object is accepted as designated, then it does not exist. Because there is no sense in introducing into a theory some object as designated, if we have an idea that it exists. A designated object, as a rule, serves as a correlate to other objects of a theory. Thus, so far two significant questions remain unanswered: 1) why a designated object has to exist, and 2) why we have to prove its existence.

The next task is to justify the possibility of such a proof. It is a central point of the issue. Kant and his adherents insist on the fundamental impossibility of the proof of the same kind. At the same time, opponents not only insist on the concept of its possibility, but also tirelessly offer different variations of the proof. As a rule, these variations are variations of the ontological argument of Anselm. As we have seen, Dragalina-Chernaya tries to solve the issue. Unfortunately, it is not an analytical way, since it is not logical in the strictest sense.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have considered only two seminal articles, which initiated the discussion about MOA—Malcolm's version of the OA and Hartshorne's amended one. Our research has revealed two important problems with the modal versions of the OA. First, most of them are either unsound or ambiguous. Second, the logical methods of the proof of the existence of God are at least questionable.

A great deal of other versions of OA have since been proposed by various authors. Nevertheless, none of them can avoid these standard difficulties, which have to be eliminated for successful ontological proof. Currently we have three endeavours: 1) to avoid the idea of existence as a first order predicate; 2) to use the medieval interpretation of modality *de re* instead of the one accepted in contemporary logic; 3) to determine whether we can prove the existence of God with *a priori* methods.

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