

## *The Ontological Meta–Argument (and the Ontological Argument for the Actuality of the World)\**

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*Would the Ontological Argument Greater Than Which None Can Be Conceived prove the existence of God? Might an ontological argument prove the actuality of the world (as Robert Nozick once suggested)? Should you believe that you're actual, even if you're not? And what happens if we attempt to answer these questions, having adopted Nozick's mature view of the function of argument?*

The fool hath said in his heart, the ontological argument doesn't work. And of course he's right. As St. Anselm rendered it,<sup>1</sup> the argument is flawed in many ways—for instance, if it proved the existence of God, it would, as Guanilo pointed out during Anselm's lifetime, also prove the existence of the greatest conceivable island—and Robert Nozick, whom we're remembering here, has called it the “most famous of all fishy philosophical arguments.” But since Nozick toyed with the idea that God would need it to prove His own existence to Himself, let's see if we can't do better.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, whether or not *we* can come up with a better ontological argument is beside the point. What matters is not what the ontological argument that we have proves, or whether we know how to fix it, but what is proved by the greatest conceivable ontological argument. After

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<sup>1</sup> *Proslogium*, ch. 2; in *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle: Open Court, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Nozick, *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 130; “Testament,” in *Socratic Puzzles* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 324–328.

all, if there is an argument to be assembled, even one we will never find, that is valid, sound and has  $p$  as its conclusion, then  $p$  is true.

So consider the greatest conceivable ontological argument. First, an argument that works is better than an argument that doesn't. So an ontological argument that does not work is not the best conceivable; the greatest conceivable ontological argument *does* work. Second, what does that argument prove? If we allow that arguments can be assessed not merely formally (for their validity, soundness, and other similar merits), but for their choice of subject matter, we must also allow that the greatest conceivable ontological argument must have the most important, deepest, and generally most impressive subject matter: and surely that would be the existence of God. But then the greatest conceivable ontological argument is effective and it proves the existence of God.

Now you may want to reply that this argument (or, if you like, meta-argument) is not only flawed, but *sophistical*. And of course it is both. But again, what matters is not what *this* ontological meta-argument shows, but what the best conceivable ontological meta-argument shows. And surely *that* argument would work, and would not be *sophistical*, and would have these very claims as its subject matter, so that...

Nozick asked what it would take to show the world (and yourself) to be actual, rather than merely possible or fictional, and experimented with "a surrogate for the ontological argument, the best substitute that secular money can buy," meant to prove that our own world is actual, or anyhow, to explain *why* it is actual.<sup>3</sup> The reason for turning to an ontological argument is that you need to come up with something to say to convince yourself of your own actuality that a fictional or simply possible character couldn't say as well. Following the lead of the more traditional ontological argument, Nozick takes it that the argument would turn on what he calls a Sufficient Explanatory Property—that is, a property such that having it would guarantee (or anyway, make reasonable the conclusion of) actual existence.

Unlike the more traditional ontological argument, where the pivotal property is part of the concept or definition of God, the premise that gets the argument for actuality off the ground will have to be confirmably, visibly true of the world we inhabit. The problem is that Sufficient Explanatory Properties have a glitzy, too-spectacular look to them; that's indicated by examples like 'greater than which none can be conceived,' which we've just been borrowing, or Leibniz's 'best of all possible worlds.' Voltaire complained about Leibniz that our world is visibly not-so-spectacular; it is unlikely to have such a property.<sup>4</sup>

Nozick makes it clear that he doesn't intend the indexical understanding of actuality that's become familiar in philosophical discussions of

<sup>3</sup> *Invariances*, 164, emphasis deleted; the surrogate argument is sketched at 157–168. See also "Fiction," in *Socratic Puzzles*, 313–316.

<sup>4</sup> Nozick considers "being average" as a Sufficient Explanatory Property. That's less implausibly glitzy, but how likely is it that our world is the exactly average one—in the technical sense Nozick considers, or in any other reasonably exact sense? Still, this

modality, on which “the actual world” just means, in your mouth, whichever possible world you’re in. His tag for the nonindexical alternative is “asymmetrical” actuality, and he allows that on an asymmetrical notion of actuality there might be more than one actual world. (On the usual way of thinking, there’s just one actual world.) However, if we allow that actual worlds are still going to be few and far between among the possibilities or fictions, then the likelihood that one’s own world is actual, in the absence of some argument to the contrary, ought to be very low indeed, low enough to make it rational for us to resign ourselves to being not more than mere might-have-beens.

Is there a meta-argument for the actuality of our world that does better? Let’s allow that the best argument for actuality does actually work... but that means, works in the actual world, which is not necessarily our world. The improved argument invoked by the meta-argument works, but not for us.

If ontological arguments show God to be actual, but leave us convinced that our own world is not actual, then God turns out to be off in some *other* possible world. And provided that God can’t reach out to affect worlds He’s not in, then we don’t have to worry about Him. (However, we will have to worry if God is the author of our *fictional* world.) An atheist might be tempted to gloat that ontological arguments give us the best of both worlds, by proving the existence of God, while getting us out from under His thumb.

However, perhaps only what is actual matters. We’re not usually all that upset about disasters that only *might* have happened, or all that proud of the things we might have done but didn’t; if we thought that we weren’t living in the actual world, wouldn’t we be more easygoing about achievements and catastrophes? And it would be hard to take a lot of credit for merely fictional accomplishments; those are no harder than an announcement on the part of one’s author. (Then again, maybe not: if it turned out that *this* world was merely possible, we might decide that we cared more about mere possibility than we had thought.) Nozick memorably demanded a thoughtful answer to the question, “Why do we care about actually living our lives, as contrasted with merely experiencing simulations of them?”<sup>5</sup> We likewise owe a thoughtful answer to the question, “Why do we care about being actual rather than merely possible?”

Leaving that answer pending, if we do convince ourselves that what is actual matters sufficiently more than what is merely possible, we make room for a version of Pascal’s Wager, to the effect that you should believe

move suggests seeing if the ontological argument could be improved by making it more modest. Surely something has to be at least *good enough* to count as God. And surely a God that didn’t exist would hardly be good enough. (Call this the *satisficing ontological argument*.) But would this be the *same* God whose existence was going to be established by the old-fashioned, maximalist ontological argument? And wouldn’t a merely good-enough God be a disappointment?

<sup>5</sup> *Anarchy, State, Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 42–45.

that you are actual.<sup>6</sup> For if you *are* actual, and you don't believe it, you will fail to be motivated to do much of anything that matters—and that matters a good deal. Whereas if you aren't actual, and you falsely believe that you are, well, it doesn't really matter. But if the ontological meta-argument shows that God is actual, and a Pascal's Wager on actuality shows that, even if the chances that you are actual are very small, you ought to believe yourself to be actual (and act that way too), then you ought to believe and act as though you are in God's world.<sup>7</sup>

Now even if the argument were better than it is, I don't think Nozick would have found it compelling himself. Most philosophers are lucky if they can think of a single strong argument bearing on a claim; for them, accepting the conclusion of an argument they come up with is a method that usually gives univocal results. Nozick was a whole lot smarter than most philosophers, however, and being as bright as that made the method unusable; when Nozick considered a claim, it was too easy for him to think of strong arguments pro and con. Since the arguments didn't give him a univocal answer, he decided that the value of arguments did not have to do with their compellingness. (Saying that you were forced to believe something by an argument was an evasion of responsibility on the part of the intelligent, and a way of bullying the less intelligent.) What arguments were for, rather, was to *explain*.<sup>8</sup> In this spirit, it would probably be best to understand the Ontological Argument not as a substitute or prop for faith, but as elucidating a conception of God. And if Nozick is right, and arguments shouldn't be about making you believe their conclusions, even against your will, then maybe precisely the very best ontological argument, the one greater than which none could be conceived, wouldn't (and this would be to take back a premise of the ontological meta-argument) *prove* the existence of God, actually.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Michel Le Guern (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), vol. 2, sec. 397.

<sup>7</sup> Nozick might have said that even if it would be an irrational thing for you to believe, believing it might nonetheless be the rational thing to do. See *The Nature of Rationality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 70.

<sup>8</sup> *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), Introduction. Discussing "Newcomb's Problem and Two Principles of Choice" (also in *Socratic Puzzles*), Nozick remarks that the two common views on the issue both seem to come with compelling arguments: "Given two such compelling opposing arguments, it will not do to rest content with one's belief that one knows what to do. Nor will it do to just repeat one of the arguments, loudly and slowly." (48)