

ON ARGUING FROM GOD'S POSSIBILITY  
TO HIS NECESSITY

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Consider any argument for the existence of God that has the following argument — skeleton all of whose premisses are *essential*, in the sense of being indispensable to the formal validity of the argument:

- (A) (1) If it's possible that a perfect being exists, then it's necessary that a perfect being exists.  
(2) It's possible that a perfect being exists.

Therefore,

- (3) It's necessary that a perfect being exists.

Arguments of this type have been advanced by Leibniz and Spinoza, and by Charles Hartshorne, J. F. Ross, and Alvin Plantinga.

Now it follows from the meaning of «proof» that:

- (P1) An argument, R, is a proof of its conclusion to a person, S, only if each of R's essential premisses is either known by S to be true or is such that S has a good reason to suppose it to be true.

and also:

- (P2) An argument, R, is a proof of its conclusion, C, to a person, S, only if S could come to know the truth of C on the basis of R.

As a corollary of (P1) and (P2) we have:

- (P3) An argument, R, is a proof of its conclusion, C, to a person, S, only if there is no essential premiss, P, of R such that S knows that P is logically equivalent to C.

The reason for (P3) is that according to (P1) S must know or have good reason to suppose P to be true. But if S also knows that P is logically equivalent to C, then any reason for accepting P is also a reason for accepting C. Hence, S must know or have good reason to accept P, and also C, independent of and prior to the argument, R. But if so, S cannot come to know that C is true *on the basis of R*. So according to (P2), R would not be a proof of C for S.

Now consider any argument, G, that contains (A), where (A)'s premisses are essential to G. According to (P1), if G proves (3) to S, S must know or have good reason to accept premiss (1). Suppose the latter is the case. But undoubtedly S will also realize,

- (4) If it's necessary that a perfect being exists, then it's possible that a perfect being exists.

And S will undoubtedly realize that as a result of (1) and (4),

- (5) *It's possible that a perfect being exists* is logically equivalent to *it's necessary that a perfect being exists*.

or, in other words, that the premiss (2) is logically equivalent to the conclusion, (3).

But then according to (P3), G does not prove (3) to S, since S knows that (2) and (3) are logically equivalent.

The upshot is that anyone who claims to know that (1) is true, but also knows that (4) is true and that (5) follows from (1) and (4), cannot claim that G is a *proof* of the existence of God. Amongst such persons who cannot make such a claim we undoubtedly must count Leibniz, Spinoza, Hartshorne, Ross, and Plantinga.

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