

Against an Updated Ontological Argument

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The ontological argument for God's existence may seem to some as more of an exercise in logic-chopping than it does as a successful demonstration of the existence of a perfect being that is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good. Much of the recent discussion has focused on modal versions of the ontological argument (Plantinga 1974, Malcolm 1960, Godel 1995), though some contemporary proponents have defended the "standard" Anselmian argument that finds its basis in *Proslogion* 2 (Davis 1997, Baker and Matthew 2010).¹

In this paper, I examine a recent attempt at updating Anselm's standard ontological argument by employing the notion of mediated and unmediated causal powers. First, I will present the updated version of the ontological argument and discuss the metaphysical framework of causal powers that is utilized in the argument. I then show that some of the key assumptions in this version of the ontological argument can be rejected. Furthermore, once we closely examine some of the assumptions, it will be apparent that the updated version in some ways collapses back to Anselm's original version and hence is subject to some of the same worries. Although the updated version that relies on the metaphysics of causal powers provides some novelty to the discussion of the ontological argument, I conclude that this version is nevertheless unsuccessful.

1 Causal Powers and the Updated Ontological Argument

Anselm's original formulation of the ontological argument (as found in *Proslogion* 2) can be summarized (and overly simplified) as follows:

¹ The modal version is either found in, inspired by, or is interestingly similar to Anselm's argument in *Proslogion* 3. I leave historical exegesis and interpretation aside in this paper.

Let ‘God’ be defined as that than which no greater being can be conceived. I can conceive of God, and hence God exists in the intellect. For *reductio*, assume that God exists in the intellect alone—that is, God does not also exist in reality. But I can conceive of God as existing in reality, and it is greater to exist in reality (and in the intellect) than to exist in the intellect alone. Hence, I can conceive of a being greater than God, which is to say that I can conceive of a being greater than that than which no greater being can be conceived. Contradiction! Hence, God does not exist in the intellect alone but also exists in reality.

The historical objections to Anselm’s argument are well known—such as Gaunilo’s Lost Island parody argument, Kant’s criticism that existence is not a real predicate, the question-begging charge, etc. The argument has also been criticized for presupposing a Meinongian (or Meinongian-like) ontology that permits quantifying over non-existing objects (van Inwagen 2010, 2012), especially since the argument seems to make the claim that there are at least two modes of existence: existence-in-reality and existence-in-the-intellect.

Recently in this journal, Lynne Rudder Baker has offered what she regards as an “intuitive, stripped-down Anselmian argument” (2013, 24), which we will call the ‘*Updated Argument*.’² The Updated Argument purports to avoid the Meinongian presupposition—or if Anselm’s original argument makes no such presupposition, the updated version avoids distinguishing between existence-in-reality and existence-in-the-intellect (though from here on out, I will label this distinction ‘Meinongianism’—even if it is not perfectly accurate). Nor does the Updated Argument rely on certain modal assumptions; it does not require accepting S5 or the Brouwer system. The Updated Argument sticks with the non-modal approach in Anselm’s original version.

² The argument is less formally stated in Matthews and Baker (2010) and (2011).

The Updated Argument employs four (alleged) facts that Baker considers to be intuitive and plausible:

Fact #1: Human beings can think about and talk about an individual, whether the individual exists or not.

Fact #2: In order to argue about the existence of an individual, the disputants must both be talking about the same thing, independently of whether or not it exists.

Fact #3: Things that are talked and thought about but that do not exist have only mediated causal powers—they have no unmediated causal powers.

Fact #4: For anything that has only mediated causal powers, it is conceivable that there is something greater: an otherwise-similar thing that has unmediated causal powers.

Facts #1 and #2 seem to be plausible claims (though no doubt they can be challenged). We do seem to talk about individuals even when we are unaware of their existential status—such as when discussing or searching for a murderer even though the investigators are unsure whether the death was by murder or suicide. If the death was by the latter, then there is no murderer, and yet the proper authorities might make statements about such an individual (e.g., “she would have had to come through the window since the door was locked.”). Now Baker uses the example of talking about Sherlock Holmes even though Sherlock does not exist. But that is too quick, for some might argue that Sherlock Holmes does indeed exist, not as a concrete object such as a human being but as an abstract entity (Thomasson 1999, Salmon 1998, van Inwagen 2003). It would therefore be better to say that we can think and talk about concrete objects that do not

exist. We can then think and talk about Sherlock even though there is no concrete thing that is referred to when we utter ‘Sherlock.’

How can we talk about a non-existent concrete object? According to Baker, we can do so by pretense (cf. Kripke 2011, 59). In discourse about fictional entities, we pretend that such things exist. This should avoid worries about quantifying over non-existent objects. Without the use of pretense, the statement ‘Sherlock lives on 221B Baker Street’ would entail ‘there is something that lives on 221B Baker Street’; yet no existing thing lives on 221B Baker Street, and hence it seems as though we must claim that there is a non-existent object. But by making use of pretense, we can posit an operator F of fictional discourse such that ‘there is something that lives on 221B Baker Street’ is true just in case $F(\exists x)x$ lives on 221B Baker Street—and that claim lacks existential import.³

According to Baker, the advantage of starting with Fact #1 is that it allows the Updated Argument to avoid Anselm’s commitment to Meinongianism or to two modes of existence. There is just existence full stop, and our question is whether God exists (not whether he exists both in the intellect and in reality). Additionally, Baker claims that the Updated Argument avoids begging the question of God’s existence, for talk about God does not smuggle in that God exists given that we can think and talk about individuals whether we know that they exist or not.

Fact #2 ensures that equivocation does not occur among disputants. Indeed, the “fool” may not be aware that ‘God’ means *that than which nothing greater can be conceived*. But such a meaning can be introduced or stipulated, and once the interlocutor grasps the meaning, then the argument can get underway.

³ Baker does not use an F -operator, but I take it that this is what she has in mind when she claims that we utter certain propositions in the pretense.

Fact #3 is not as obvious or intuitive as the first two facts, but it can be motivated by the putative effects that non-existing things seem to have (and by ‘a non-existent thing having power to bring about an effect,’ Baker appears to mean $F(\exists x)x$ brings about effect E). So according to Baker, Sherlock has the causal power to bring about Watson’s hurt feelings as well as the causal power to bring about the reader’s delight or amusement as he brilliantly solves another case (in the fictional narrative).

Baker avers that fictional characters are in possession of only mediated causal powers, that is powers that are “mediated through the thoughts of existing people who think of them” (2013, 25). Real objects may have some mediated causal powers, but they are also in possession of unmediated causal powers. Baker’s explication of the possession of unmediated causal powers is negative—it involves the possession of causal powers not mediated through the thoughts of existing people; they are “wholly independent of what others may think” (ibid., 26). Now take a character that we will call ‘Eli.’ Suppose every other conscious subject has never thought of Eli.⁴ Whatever other causal power Eli may have will be Eli’s unmediated causal powers. With that distinction, fictional characters that appear to have effects are “really the effects of existing people who think and talk about [those characters],” and so “to say that something has only mediated causal powers is to say that certain effects are attributed to it, and those effects are caused by people with unmediated causal powers” (ibid.).⁵

⁴ Complications arise if the conscious being is God, but we will leave that aside so as not to complicate matters even more.

⁵ Oppy (2011a, 2011b) criticizes an earlier version of the Updated Argument (found in Matthews and Baker 2010, 2011). He argues that in the pretense, we say that Pegasus has the unmediated causal power to fly, but he has only mediated causal powers if he doesn’t exist. Similarly, in the pretense, we can say God has unmediated causal powers (say, to part the Red Sea)—but the “fool” (who declares that there is no God) claims that God has only mediated causal powers when the pretense is dropped. Matthews and Baker have clarified their position by asserting that Pegasus is not assigned unmediated causal powers even in pretense—so Pegasus only possesses mediated causal powers (2011, 303).

Finally, Fact #4 is supposed to be intuitive insofar as the possession of unmediated causal powers is a great-making property—or at least, it is better to have unmediated causal powers as opposed to having only mediated causal powers. Baker does not say much in defense of Fact #4, though it seems that it is motivated by the supposition that being able to bring about an effect for oneself and not through others is in some sense better or greater than merely being able to bring things about through others. Perhaps the intuition is that it may impinge on omnipotence not to be able to bring about an effect on one’s own but only through (the assistance of) others. Or perhaps it is better to have unmediated causal powers since it “endows its bearer with some measure of value, or greatness, or metaphysical stature, regardless of external circumstances” (Morris 1991, 35).⁶ Again it’s not clear since Baker doesn’t elaborate her defense of Fact #4.

With these four facts, Baker presents the Updated Argument as follows:

- (1) God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived—whether he really exists or not. (by Facts #1 & #2)
- (2) God does not exist. (premise for reductio)
- (3) If God does not exist, then he has only mediated causal powers. (by Fact #3)
- (4) God has only mediated causal powers. (by 2,3)
- (5) If God has only mediated causal powers, then it is conceivable that something is greater than God. (by Fact #4)
- (6) It is conceivable that something is greater than God. (by 4,5)
- (7) It is conceivable that something is greater than that than which nothing greater can be conceived. (by 6,1).

⁶ Morris is here talking about intrinsic causal powers, but I take that to be the same or similar to Baker’s notion of unmediated causal powers.

But (7) is a contradiction. Given the acceptance of Facts #1 - #4, we are left to deny (2) and so must conclude that God does exist. And since the argument is valid, the only way to object is to deny one of the four facts. We now turn to such an evaluation of the alleged facts.

2 Against the Updated Argument

Both Facts #3 and #4 are metaphysically substantive, especially given their employment of (mediated and unmediated) causal powers, so it should not come as a surprise that these two facts will be the ones contested.⁷

Recall that the Updated Argument intended to avoid any presupposition of Meinongianism. But Fact #3 may be smuggling in the Meinongian or the two-modes-of-existence assumption. Part of the problem is that Baker does not elaborate on what it takes for a fictional character to be in possession of mediated causal powers. Consider two possible interpretations (and there may of course be others, but I use these to illustrate the worry):

- (C1) A fictional character *C* has mediated causal powers *P* if and only if the thoughts, words, and deeds of existent things ascribe *P* to *C*, or
- (C2) A fictional character *C* has mediated causal powers *P* if and only if the thoughts, words, and deeds of existent things presuppose the belief that *C* has *P*.

In both (C1) and (C2), *C* in the left-hand side of the bi-conditional must be regarded under the pretense (that is, they should be interpreted as '*F*: *C* has *P*'). But it's not clear how to handle *C* in the right-hand side of the bi-conditional. The pretense must somehow be dropped, but it is unclear how to do so while assigning causal powers to *C*.

Moreover, the thoughts of existing individuals must say that there is *something* that has the ability to fly or is able to bring about delight or amusement to its reader. Causal powers

⁷ As noted earlier, worries can be raised against Facts #1 and #2, but my focus will not be on these.

cannot be “free-floaters”; they must have a subject. If so, then it looks as though Fact #3 then requires Meinongianism given that the fictional character will exist-in-the-intellect though it does not exist-in-reality. Perhaps Baker would claim instead that the assignment of mediated causal powers to a fictional character is merely to talk about the causal powers of existing individuals or their thoughts, words, and deeds (so proper modifications of (C1) or (C2) will make no mention of *C* on the right-hand side of the bi-conditional). But the result would be strange. For example, take the causal power to fly. What is the bearer of that causal power? We can’t say that the existing individual possesses that power—for you and I, though thinking about Pegasus, cannot fly. Our thoughts, words, and deeds do not have the causal power to fly. So it seems that what remains is to say that Pegasus possesses the power to fly. But then we have to allow for Pegasus to exist in the intellect even though Pegasus does not exist in reality—but that leads us back to Meinongianism. Hence, talk of assigning (mediated) causal powers to fictional characters is either illegitimate (because there is nothing, including the existing individuals and their states, that possesses such powers) or the fictional character does have the causal power, but exists not in reality but in some other mode. Since we can reject assigning causal powers to nothing and reject Meinongianism, we can reject Fact #3 (and hence, premise (3) of the Updated Argument does not follow).

The problem with Baker’s argument is that she conflates between the language of pretense and the meta-language (the non-pretense language). In pretense, we can say that fictional characters are in possession of causal powers. But when we speak strictly, the causal powers are to be assigned to the existing individuals and her thoughts, words, and deeds. However, the latter causal powers are not the same as the causal powers discussed in the

pretense. Our thoughts, words, and deeds do not have the causal power to fly, but they do have the causal power to have people form a thought or belief that Pegasus can fly.

The trouble also arises because Baker includes both intra-narrative causal powers and extra-narrative causal powers. The former include the causal power to fly whereas the latter include the causal power to amuse the reader. When considering intra-narrative causal powers, given the reasons above, we are left with saying that either nothing has those powers or that something that exists in the intellect (but not in reality) has those powers—and both claims can be rejected. However, when considering extra-narrative causal powers, it seems more plausible to say that the existing individuals and her thoughts, words, and deeds have those causal powers (i.e., Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his thoughts, words, and deeds have the causal power to amuse the reader). But that is not to claim that the fictional character, such as Sherlock, has those causal powers.⁸

Fact #4 is similarly problematic since it either assigns mediated causal powers to nothing or presupposes Meinongianism (when considering intra-narrative causal powers), or it assigns the causal powers to existing individuals and their states (when considering extra-narrative causal powers) and not the fictional character. But even if these worries could be allayed, Fact #4 yields a collapse of the Updated Argument back to Anselm's original version. Baker maintains that all other things being equal, it is greater to possess unmediated causal powers than to possess only mediated causal powers. But what differentiates the possession of unmediated causal powers and the possession of mediated causal powers? To illustrate the worry, let me hereby create a new fictional character: Zeric. Zeric is otherwise similar to me but does not exist

⁸ An anonymous reviewer suggests that we can employ the distinction between encoded properties and exemplified properties as found in Zalta 1983, where Pegasus encodes the property of flying but exemplifies the property of amusing the readers. Given this distinction, the worry is that Baker appears to be conflating these two ways of possessing properties, or perhaps even reducing property-exemplification to property-encoding (especially given the remarks made in Matthews and Baker 2011).

(and the fictional narrative we tell about Zeric is extremely similar to the historical narrative we would tell about my life and career). Now Zeric is a professor and musician, so Zeric has the causal power to bring worry to his (fictional) students who have an upcoming exam, and Zeric has the causal power to play the guitar. I have these causal powers as well. Additionally, others can tell people about Zeric, and such a tale can amuse the listeners (who do not know whether Zeric exists or not), and so Zeric has the causal power to amuse individuals listening to Zeric's story. Others can tell people about me, and such a tale can amuse listeners (who do not know whether I exist or not), and so I have the causal power to amuse individuals listening to my story.

Now we might ask, what makes my causal powers *unmediated* and what makes Zeric's causal powers *mediated*? It seems that the only available answer is that my causal powers are unmediated in virtue of the fact that I exist; and Zeric's causal powers are mediated in virtue of the fact that Zeric does not exist. It can't be objected that I have causal powers to affect things in the real world whereas fictional characters don't, for Baker is willing to assign extra-narrative causal powers to fictional characters, and so fictional characters can also affect things in the real world (such as amusing readers).

Accordingly, what makes it better to have unmediated causal powers as opposed to mediated causal powers is grounded in the fact that it is better to exist than not to exist. But that was Anselm's original premise (or at least that's what it seems Anselm is claiming in *Proslogion* 2), and hence the Updated Argument does not bypass the Anselmian premise that it is better to exist in reality than to exist in the intellect alone—and that premise has received numerous criticisms. And just as Anselm's original argument, by itself, does not adequately explain why existence in reality is greater than existence in the intellect alone, so Baker does not provide an explanation of why possession of unmediated causal powers is greater than possession of

mediated causal powers, and hence we can reject Fact #4 (and so premise (5) of the Updated Argument does not follow).⁹

3 Conclusion

Although the Updated Argument makes a relatively novel contribution to the discussion of ontological arguments given its employment of causal powers, I have shown that the Updated Argument runs afoul in its attempt to assign causal powers to fictional characters and falls victim to some of the same worries as Anselm's original version (even if the Updated Argument does avoid some of the more famous historical objections). The Updated Argument's fate, then, partly depends on how well Anselm's original argument fares—and it should be fair to say that the latter has not fared well.¹⁰

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⁹ An anonymous reviewer raises a direct counterexample to Fact #4. Take a square circle, an object which does not (and cannot) exist. By Fact #3, it has only mediated causal powers, such as the power to have humans talk about it, to provoke bewilderment, etc. However, it is not conceivable that there is a square circle with unmediated causal powers, which goes against Fact #4. Perhaps Baker might claim that the assignment of causal powers for impossible objects is different than run-of-the-mill fictional characters, but her account has not given us any reason why we cannot assign causal powers to impossible objects. I thank the reviewer for this point.

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