Ross's antinomy and modal arguments for God's existence

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In his book *Philosophical Theology*, James Ross offers a modal argument for the existence of God which leads to an antinomy.¹ This antinomy and the problems derived from it exhibit the impossibility of successfully completing a modal argument for God's existence. Other philosophers have proposed versions of the modal argument for God's existence, but none have shown as keen an understanding of the argument or have developed it as thoroughly as Ross has.² Ross's version of the argument is the strongest version of the argument and so if his argument is not successful, none will be and that his is not successful and could never be successful will be established in this paper.

The argument in question is presented by Ross on pages 131-132 of *Philosophical Theology* and is essentially the following:

1. Suppose that 'God does not exist' is true.
2. It is possible that there is an explanation of God's non-existence.
3. God's non-existence is either self-explicable or hetero-explicable.
4. But suppose that God's non-existence is self-explicable.
5. If this were so, then God's existence would be either inconsistent or incompatible with the Principle of Explicability.
6. But God's existence is neither inconsistent nor incompatible with the Principle of Explicability.
7. ∴ God's non-existence is not self-explicable.
8. Suppose then that God's non-existence is hetero-explicable.
9. But given that 'God' means 'uncausally' and 'unpreventable' it is not possible that there be something else which could prevent God's existence.
10. ∴ God's non-existence is not hetero-explicable.
11. God's non-existence is not self or hetero-explicable, which is impossible.
12. ∴ God's non-existence is impossible.
13. ∴ God's existence is necessary.³
This argument is valid and if we can grant Ross the premises in steps 2, 6 and 9, then his proof is successful. But can we grant him these claims?

The second step, and consequently the steps which follow from it (e.g. 3, 5, and 11), rests on Ross’s ‘Principle of Explicability,’ which he proposes in replacement for the Principle of Sufficient Reason. The Principle of Explicability is that any logically consistent state of affairs has a possible explanation for its being the case. Ross argues that the Principle of Sufficient Reason is too strong, and I think he is right, but even if he is not and the Principle of Sufficient Reason is true, it would entail his Principle of Explicability. And that for every consistent state of affairs there be a possible explanation seems to be a reasonably conservative claim which I am willing to grant him.

The claim in step nine is a bit more troublesome, yet I think that Ross offers adequate support for it in Philosophical Theology. Simply stated, his argument is that the meaning of the term ‘God’ can be unpacked and contains predicates like ‘omnipotent,’ ‘omniscient,’ ‘morally perfect,’ ‘eternal,’ ‘uncausable,’ ‘unpreventable,’ etc. There, of course, can be much disagreement as to which predicates are to be derived from the meaning of the term ‘God’ and also what the conceptual content of these predicates, once they’re unpacked, entail. Contemporary discussion and controversy about the concepts of omnipotence and omniscience are typical examples. But the predicates which Ross chooses for the purposes of this argument, i.e. ‘uncausable’ and ‘unpreventable’ seem to be, if any are, essential to the theistic conception of God and clear enough in this context so as to allow us to grant step nine as plausible.

The premise in step 6 is, however, another matter. It may appear rather harmless, especially if one is sympathetic with the view that no existential propositions are analytic or a priori. But it also appears that one could just as reasonably claim that God’s non-existence is neither inconsistent nor incompatible with the Principle of Explicability. And here is where the serious problems begin for Ross’s modal argument. For if one supposes instead that ‘God does exist’ is true, in step 1, and in step 6 is allowed the premise that God’s non-existence is neither inconsistent nor incompatible with the Principle of Explicability, the resultant argument is a parallel argument for the necessity of God’s non-existence. The parallel argument follows:

1. Suppose that ‘God exists’ is true.
2. It is possible that there is an explanation of God’s existence.
3. God’s existence is either self-explicable or hetero-explicable.
4. But suppose that God’s existence is self-explicable.
5. If this were so, then God’s non-existence would be either inconsistent or incompatible with the Principle of Explicability.
6. But God’s non-existence is neither inconsistent nor incompatible with the Principle of Explicability.
7. ∴ God’s existence is not self-explicable.
8. Suppose then that God’s existence is hetero-explicable.