A Review Essay

REPLY TO LANGTRY

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Bruce Langtry (1999) argues against the general objection to ontological arguments presented in my book Ontological Arguments and Belief in God. I am no longer sure that that general objection is correctly expressed in my book — and, indeed, I am no longer confident that there is such a general objection to be given — but I also do not think that Langtry’s criticisms of that objection are quite right. What I propose to do here is the following: first, to briefly rehearse the general objection to ontological arguments given in my book; second, to briefly recapitulate Langtry’s criticisms of this general objection; third, to explain why I think that Langtry’s criticisms are ineffective; and fourth to air some doubts of my own about the argument which I originally defended.

1. The General Objection Rehearsed

Consider a putative ontological argument $P_1, \ldots, P_n \therefore C$. The conclusion of this argument contains some vocabulary whose use — in the way in which it is used in the conclusion of the argument — brings with it ontological commitment to God. Perhaps, for example, the name ‘God’ has an ontologically committing occurrence — as in the sentence ‘God exists’. Or, perhaps, the definite description ‘the greatest conceivable being’ has an ontologically committing occurrence — as in the sentence ‘The greatest conceivable being exists’. Or, perhaps, the indefinite description ‘a being than which none greater can be conceived’ has an ontologically committing occurrence — as in the sentence ‘A being than which none greater can be conceived exists’. Or, perhaps, there is a quantifier expression whose domain is required to include God in its range — as in the sentence ‘There is an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent sole creator of the universe’. And so forth: there are many different kinds of expressions which can be used to incur ontological commitment; some such expression must be used in an ontologically committing way in the conclusion of our argument.

But now consider the premises of the argument. Clearly, the conjunction of the premises must incur an ontological commitment to God (or else the argument will not even be valid). Yet, if the premises involve expressions — names, definite descriptions, quantified noun phrases, and the like — who use incurs an ontological commitment to God, then it seems that opponents of the argument
will be able to object to the argument on the grounds that it begs the question. Suppose, for example, that the argument goes like this: ‘God is the creator of the universe. Therefore God exists’. An even moderately alert opponent of the argument will point out that, on any construal on which this is a valid argument, the first premise clearly presupposes what the argument sets out to prove.

Perhaps one might think to reply to this argument that it could be the case that there are occurrences of expressions inside the scope of protective operators which prevent the incurring of the ontological commitments of the kind in question, but without harming the validity of the argument. Suppose, for example, that we amend the argument which we gave previously, so that it reads: ‘According to my definition, God is the creator of the universe. Therefore God exists’. Unfortunately, in this case, it is clear that the inclusion of the protective operator – while it does, indeed, undo the problematic ontological commitment – undermines the validity of the argument. And this point seems to be perfectly general: no matter what protective operators are used, if they really are able to cancel the problematic ontological commitments, then it will no longer be the case that the argument is valid.

So the proponent of any given ontological argument is faced with a dilemma: how can they hope to formulate the argument in a way which is valid but not question-begging. Use any vocabulary which brings with it an ontological commitment to God in the premises, and the argument is question-begging; clothe ontologically committing uses of this kind of vocabulary with protective operators, and the argument ceases to be valid.

2. Langtry’s Response to the General Objection

Langtry claims that there is a strategy which is open to proponents of ontological arguments, but which the general objection fails to recognise. Suppose, for example, that the following is a non-redundant premise in an ontological argument: ‘It is impossible that anything prevent the existence of God’. If we were to replace this premise with the claim that ‘According to such-and-such definition, it is impossible that anything prevent the existence of God’, then the validity of the argument will be disrupted: all that we will be able to conclude is that, according to the given definition, God exists. But, says Langtry, this is not the only option open to the proponent of the argument: why not instead replace the premise with the claim that ‘If God exists, then it is impossible that anything prevent the existence of God’? (Strictly, Langtry suggests replacement with the claim ‘If the description ‘God’ is satisfied by an existing individual, then it is impossible that anything prevent the existence of God’. However, the semantic ascent here is either inadequate or unnecessary: either God’s existence is just a matter of the name ‘God’ being satisfied by an existing individual – in which case we might as well stick with the shorter conditional – or else there