

## DOES THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT BEG THE QUESTION?

William L. Rowe<sup>1</sup> has recently raised a subtle and interesting version of an old objection to the ontological argument—the objection that it “begs the question.” My own view is that Anselm’s argument does not beg the question and that Rowe does not therefore succeed in refuting it. It will be the aim of this paper to establish this point.

Rowe states the ontological argument (OA) as follows:<sup>2</sup>

1. God exists in the understanding.
2. God might have existed in reality (God is a possible being).
3. If something exists only in the understanding and might have existed in reality, then it might have been greater than it is.
4. Suppose God exists only in the understanding.
5. God might have been greater than he is.
6. God is a being than which a greater is possible.
7. The being than which none greater is possible is a being than which a greater is possible.
8. It is false that God exists only in the understanding.
9. God exists in reality as well as in the understanding.

I have one or two quarrels with this formulation of Anselm’s *Proslogion 2* argument, but I propose to ignore them and use Rowe’s version of the argument as the basis for my discussion in this paper.

Now, how does Rowe claim that this argument begs the question? Premise (2) is the guilty premise, Rowe says. All that we would normally have thought we were granting in (2) is that the concept or definition of God (i.e., the “greatest possible being”) is coherent and non-contradictory. But when premise (3) is added, it turns out that (2) grants much more than this—in effect, it grants that God exists. Thus (2) is the point where the question of God’s existence is begged.

<sup>1</sup> William L. Rowe, “The Ontological Argument And Question Begging,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, above. A longer version of this article was first published in *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*, by Joel Feinberg (third edition; Encino, California; Dickenson Publishing Company, 1975), pp. 8-17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 425-7.

This can be seen from two examples Rowe gives us, the first of which I will call the “magician” argument. Let us define the term “magician” as a human being who performs magic tricks, and the term “magican” as an *existing* human being who performs magic tricks. Does it follow merely from the definition of the term “magican” that magicans do indeed exist? Of course not. But something of interest does follow, viz. that no non-existing thing is a magican, i.e., no non-existing thing can satisfy the definition. But what if we then proceed to grant that magicans are possible beings, i.e., that some possible things are magicans? Then it will follow that either magicans exist or they do not exist. But if (as we have already seen) no non-existing thing can be a magican, it follows that magicans must be existing things, i.e., it follows that the concept “magican” must be instantiated.

The same maneuver can be performed with God, in what I will call (following Rowe) the “simple Ontological argument” (SOA). Rowe imagines someone arguing as follows for God’s existence:<sup>3</sup>

I propose to define the term “God” as *an existing, wholly perfect being*. Now since it can’t be true that an existing, wholly perfect being does not exist, it can’t be true that God, as I’ve defined him, does not exist. Therefore, God must exist.

Rowe knows, of course, that the SOA does not prove that God exists. But what it does prove, he says, is that no non-existing thing can be God, i.e., the kind of God that is defined in the SOA. That is, the only thing that logically could exemplify the concept of God, thus defined, is an existing thing. But of course it remains to be seen whether or not anything *does* exemplify it. But, Rowe continues, let us now add premise (2) of the OA to the above argument, i.e., let us grant that the “God” defined in the SOA is a possible being. Then this God either exists or does not exist. But if no no-existing thing can be God, then God must exist in reality, i.e., the defined concept of God must be instantiated.

What has gone wrong in these arguments? Can we now define things like Gods and magicans into existence by simply combining a certain definition with the claim that the defined being is a possible being? The difficulty, Rowe argues, is the admission that the defined beings are possible beings. Normally, i.e., with beings whose

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428.

definitions do not include the property of existence, when we grant that beings are possible beings we grant only that their definitions are coherent and non-contradictory. But when "exists" is included in or is implied by a concept, it may be that no possible object exemplifies the concept, for no possible object that does not exist will exemplify a concept like "magican" in which existence is included. Thus if we ask if any possible thing is a magican, the answer will paradoxically depend on whether or not any existing thing is a magican. If no existing things are magicans, no possible things are magicans; some possible thing is a magican if and only if some existing thing is a magican.

How, then, does the OA beg the question? If we grant that the OA's definition of God is non-contradictory and if we also grant that "exists" is a greatmaking quality (premise (3)), then it follows that the only thing that could exemplify the concept of God is an existing thing. It does not yet follow that the concept of God *is* instantiated, i.e., that God *does* in fact exist. But when we go on to grant Anselm premise (2), we are allowing much more than what we have already allowed, viz. that the concept of God is non-contradictory. We are now granting that some possible object does indeed exemplify the concept of God, which together with our earlier admissions, proves that God actually exists. For, as with our magican, some possible thing will be God if and only if some existing thing is God. The notion of God cannot logically apply to a non-existing thing, so the only possible objects to which it can apply are existing ones.

But this clearly begs the question, for suppose that every existing being has some defect which it might not have had, i.e., suppose that every being might have been greater than it is. This, Rowe claims, is precisely what we were denying (without realizing it) when we allowed Anselm premise (2). When we granted him (2), we granted him that some existing being is as perfect as it can be. That is, God is a possible being if and only if some existing thing is as great as it can be. Thus we begged the question of God's existence.

This, then, is Rowe's argument against Anselm. Before attempting to assess it, however, we must first ask the following question: What exactly is the fallacy of "begging the question"? Unfortunately, this is not as easy a question to answer as might first appear. To help facilitate matters, let me suggest some possible theistic proofs, all of which are formally valid but about all of which it might be

claimed that they beg the question. Perhaps considering them will help us decide what "begging the question" is.

- A 10. God exists  
11. Therefore, God exists
- B 12. It is false that God does not exist  
13. Therefore, God exists
- C 14. God exists and triangles have three sides  
15. Therefore, God exists
- D 16. Either God exists or  $7 + 5 = 13$   
17.  $7 + 5 \neq 13$   
18. Therefore, God exists<sup>4</sup>

Argument A is formally valid but is obviously question begging. Why? Clearly because the conclusion appears as a premise. The argument simply assumes what it attempts to prove and is therefore about as unconvincing as an argument can be. Argument B also seems obviously to beg the question. But the conclusion does not here appear as a premise: the difficulty seems to be rather that a proposition equivalent to the conclusion appears as a premise. It is not just that (12) entails (13) (it does): the problem is that (12) is just an alternative way of stating (13) or is logically equivalent to (13).

Does argument C beg the question? Yes it does, but not because (14) is equivalent to (15). (14) is not equivalent to (15) because (15) does not entail (14). The difficulty here is that the conclusion, while not *equivalent* to a premise, is a *conjunct* of a premise. Perhaps we should say, then, that an argument begs the question if the conclusion is equivalent to one of the premises or to a conjunct of one of the premises—not if it is merely entailed by the premises.

As Plantinga points out, the difficulty with argument D is neither its validity (it is formally valid) nor its soundness (to the theist, who accepts both (18) and therefore (16), it is sound). The difficulty is rather that no one would accept (16) unless he also accepted (18). Perhaps this allows us to say that an argument begs the question if the truth or acceptability of one of the premises depends upon the truth or acceptability of the conclusion, i.e., if there is no

<sup>4</sup> This argument is discussed by Alvin Plantinga in *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 217-218.

reason to accept the premise unless the conclusion is already accepted.

Let us then list two ways in which an argument may be guilty of begging the question.

An argument begs the question if and only if either (1) the conclusion or a proposition logically equivalent to the conclusion appears as a premise or as a conjunct of a premise, or (2) the truth of a premise depends upon the truth of the conclusion (i.e., there is no reason to accept the premise unless the conclusion is already accepted).

No doubt some arguments beg the question in both ways, some in the first way but not the second, and some in the second way but not the first. This is a thorny issue: much more than this needs to be said about the fallacy of begging the question. But perhaps this will do for our present purposes.

It should be pointed out that many question begging arguments are formally valid: the conclusion will obviously follow from the premises on the valid logical principle of  $p \rightarrow p$ . But "question begging" is an informal fallacy, since the argument gives no support whatsoever to the conclusion. If the conclusion is acceptable in the first place there is no need to introduce it as a premise, and if the conclusion is in doubt it will not alleviate the doubt simply to introduce it as a premise. This is why question begging arguments are completely devoid of persuasive strength. The fallacy is simply that of assuming the truth of what is to be proved.

We can now return to Rowe's critique of the OA. What are we to make of it? Let me make three preliminary points before proceeding to a deeper look at it. The *first* thing to notice is that if the OA does indeed "beg the question" the fallacy will be found in the deep structure of the argument rather than on the surface. The SOA does of course openly beg the question—"God" is there defined in part as an existing being. But nowhere in the premises of Rowe's version of the OA is God defined as an existing being, nor do any of the premises assume that God exists. Thus the OA at least does not *obviously* beg the question.

So Rowe must be claiming that the argument in its deep structure begs the question of God's existence. But Rowe's claim must be more than that the conclusion "God exists" is "contained in" the premises, for this is simply a metaphorical way of saying that

the conclusion “follows from” or is “entailed by” the premises—which is true of any formally and informally valid argument. This point must be noted carefully, for confusion on it can lead to totally misplaced criticisms of logically impeccable arguments. For example, let us take *the* argument in the history of logic which is formally and informally valid if *any* argument is formally and informally valid:

- 19. All men are mortal.
- 20. Socrates is a man.
- 21. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

The misplaced criticism would run as follows: “This argument begs the question in that we were conceding more than we thought we were conceding in premise (20). We thought we were just granting that ‘Socrates is a man’, but unbeknownst to us we were tacitly conceding that ‘Socrates is mortal’. When we grant that any *x* is a man, having already granted that all men are mortal, we are begging the question, for we are in effect asserting that *x* is mortal.”<sup>5</sup>

My second point concerns Rowe’s apparent move from

- 22. *x* is a possible thing.

to

- 23. *x* is either an existing thing or a non-existing thing.

He says:<sup>6</sup>

This difficulty arises when we take into account Anselm’s implicit claim that God is a possible thing... For many possible things, like the Fountain of Youth, do not exist. But if something is a possible thing then it is either an existing thing or a non-existing thing. The set of possible things can be exhaus-

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that some philosophers have apparently claimed that the syllogism does indeed beg the question. John Stuart Mill, at least, sets out to defend the syllogism against this very charge in his *System of Logic*. But, sadly, Mill’s defense appears on reflection to grant exactly what he is attempting to deny. (See *An Introduction To Logic and the Scientific Method*, by Morris Cohen and Ernest Nagel (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1934), pp. 177-181. However, I have found no good arguments either in Mill or elsewhere for holding that the syllogism is an argument form that begs the question. And of course the “misplaced criticism” argument, if taken as a reason to deny the informal validity of the syllogism, will equally well apply against even more respectable argument forms, e.g., *Modus Ponens*. And if *Modus Ponens* begs the question, are there any informally valid arguments?

<sup>6</sup> Rowe, pp. 429-30.

tively divided into those possible things which actually exist and those possible things which do not exist. Therefore, if Anselm's God is a possible thing it is either an existing thing or a non-existing thing.

And again:<sup>7</sup>

For if some possible object exemplifies his concept of God, that object is either an existing thing or a non-existing thing.

Here I have a question: Isn't it true of impossible things too (e.g., square circles) that either they exist or they don't exist? Of course what is true *only* of possible things is that they can either exist or fail to exist; i.e., both existing and not existing are genuine possibilities for them, while impossible things can only fail to exist. So I do not wish to question (23)—it is just that it seems to me necessarily true; i.e., it will be true of *any object at all*. And perhaps this suggests that Anselm's premise (2) is not as suspicious an item as Rowe makes out. For (23), if it is supposed to be the problematical implication of (22), is true of any (even impossible) object whatever, even without premise (22). In short, Rowe seems to claim that when we grant premise (2) we grant that God either exists or fails to exist, as if we could reasonably have denied that this is so. But we could not have done so, and thus perhaps premise (2) is relatively innocuous after all.

The *third* thing to notice is that there are at least two clear differences between the OA on the one hand and the SOA and the "magican" argument on the other hand. The first difference is as follows: as already noted, the OA nowhere defines God as an existing being (God is defined rather as the "greatest possible being"), nor are we even asked to assume that God exists (premise (4), in fact, asks us to assume just the opposite). But in the SOA and the "magican" argument the beings whose existence are being argued for *are* defined as existing; i.e., "exists" is listed as one of the defining characteristics of these beings. So perhaps Rowe is correct that it is a unique characteristic of arguments which define a given being as existing that the additional premise that the being is a possible being in effect "begs the question" and grants that the being does indeed exist. But this will not prove that the OA shares this same unique characteristic and similarly "begs the question" unless it can be shown where in the OA God is defined as existing.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

The second difference is simply that the SOA and the "magican" argument do not need premises like premise (3) of the OA, which is obviously crucial to the OA. These important dissimilarities between the OA and the arguments with which Rowe asks us to compare it make us suspicious that Rowe is mistaken in his criticism. These other arguments do indeed beg the question, but it is not clear at this point that the OA does.

Let us then look a bit deeper at Rowe's argument. What he appears to be claiming is that the problem is caused by premise (3) of the OA together with the OA's definition of God ("greatest possible being"). Together these entail that no non-existing thing can be God, and when premise (2) is added, it follows that God actually exists. Let us call the sentence, "No non-existing thing can be God," the "preliminary conclusion" of the OA, and the sentence, "God exists," the "ultimate conclusion" of the OA. Even if Rowe will grant my above point that the OA does not define God as existing (as does the SOA), he can still claim that premise (3) of the OA plus the OA's definition of God together lead to the preliminary conclusion of the OA, "No non-existing thing can be God."

This appears to be true, but stated this simply, it is surely misleading if it is to produce the conclusion that the OA begs the question. For there is a clear difference between the way the preliminary conclusion is reached in the OA and the way it is reached in the SOA. In the case of the SOA the preliminary conclusion *must be granted*, since it follows directly from the definition of God, and Rowe appears to accept the principle that an ontological arguer can define God in any way that he pleases.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the SOA, then, we cannot avoid granting the preliminary conclusion, and criticism of this argument must center elsewhere.

But with the OA this is not the case. The preliminary conclusion is not here *defined* into acceptability. We can both give Anselm whatever consistent definition of God he prefers and still refuse to accept the preliminary conclusion. We can do this by simply refusing to agree to one of his premises, viz. (3). Premise (3) may or may not seem intuitively plausible, and those to whom it seems plausible will not want to reject it. But the point is that with the OA we are not logically *forced* to accept the preliminary conclusion on

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 427.



the mere grounds that Anselm can define God in any consistent way he pleases.

Let us pose the issue in a slightly different way: Is the OA guilty of begging the question in any of the senses I listed on page 5? I cannot see that it is, and Rowe does not seem to me to have shown that it is. To take the second sense first, it does not seem that the truth of any of the premises of Rowe's version of the OA (page 433) depends on the truth of the conclusion. It seems that Anselm can make a good case for each of his premises without invoking the conclusion at all. Perhaps he even thought his premises were all necessary truths. But it is certainly not true that there is a premise of the OA (like (16) of D) which could only be accepted by someone who already accepted the conclusion.

But perhaps the ontological argument begs the question in the other way. And, indeed, this seems to be what Rowe is claiming, for in summing up his objection to Anselm, he says:<sup>9</sup>

In granting that Anselm's God is a possible thing we are in fact granting that Anselm's God actually exists. But since the purpose of the argument is to prove to us that Anselm's God exists, we cannot be asked to grant as a premise a statement which is virtually equivalent to the conclusion that is to be proved... The additional premise claims more than that Anselm's concept of God isn't incoherent or contradictory. It amounts to the assertion that some existing being is supremely great.

But is it so strange that the definition of God together with premises (2) and (3) produce the conclusion that God exists? This is just what Anselm would claim his intentions were, and it is difficult to see any question begging here. It may be that some people are *surprised* by the result ("... in granting Anselm the premise that God is a possible thing we have granted far more than we intended to grant"<sup>10</sup>), but this surely does not indicate any fallacy in Anselm's reasoning. It might be true that the definition of God together with premises (2) and (3) *logically entail* that God exists, but that is another matter. This certainly does not show that premise (2) is "virtually equivalent" to "God exists" or that it "amounts to the assertion" that God exists.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 432.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

In the present context, i.e., in conjunction with the definition of God and with premise (3), it appears to be true that premise (2) entails that God exists. But if this is "question begging," then I would say that we have apparent grounds for charging that the "Socrates is mortal" argument begs the question too ("In granting that 'Socrates is a man' we were granting more than we intended," etc.). So one possible response to Rowe's paper is to say that if Rowe is correct, *all* formally valid arguments "beg the question." But the proper response, as it seems to me, is simply to congratulate Rowe on revealing some of the inner-workings of Anselm's definitions and premises, showing us a new way of understanding the logic of the OA. For it is quite true—so Anselm would say—that the definition of God together with premises (2) and (3) prove that God exists.

So Anselm does not arbitrarily claim that God exists or define God as an existing being (as does the SOA)—rather, he *proves* that God exists. Of course, the mere positing of a being defined as an existing being does not prove that it exists. The definition must appear in a formally and informally valid argument whose conclusion is that it exists. And by adding "and informally," I mean to include the requirement that the argument must not beg the question by using a claim that the being is an existing being as a logical step that helps derive the conclusion. It does not seem to me that Rowe has shown that Anselm has made this or a similar mistake. And so it seems to me that the OA still stands.<sup>11</sup>

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