

Prior's Logical Analysis of the Ontological Argument

(Extended Abstract)

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A.N. Prior found Anselm's so-called ontological argument for the existence of God rather interesting. In his publications he contributed significantly to the logical and conceptual analysis of this famous argument, and it is evident from his unpublished papers and his letters that he was struggling in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the logical and philosophical problems related to the argument.

Prior was clearly interested in the classical problem concerning whether or not existence can be understood as a predicate. He even sometimes even considered the possibility of treating existence as a subject of a sentence (“existence is a perfection”). However, he also argued that these problems regarding the grammatical status of “existence” is not the most fundamental or crucial problem in relation to the various versions of the ontological problem. Instead, he found the relations between existence and modality very interesting and important. In fact, he argued that we may speak about two kinds of existence, i.e. existence in a belief-world (represented in terms of the quantifier, \sum) and existence in the real world (represented in terms of the quantifier, \exists). Using R (“real”) as a predicate, Prior stated the relation between these two kinds of existence in following manner:

$$\exists x Fx \equiv \sum x (Rx \ \& \ Fx)$$

where F stands for an arbitrary property.

In the present paper we intend to discuss some important aspects of Prior's work on the topics related to the ontological argument as we know this work from his publications and from his unpublished papers and letters.

Prior considered at least three different versions of the ontological argument. What we might call version 1 of the argument is basically a classical syllogism:

Whatever is perfect is divine and has real existence.
Some thinkable is perfect.
Therefore:
Some thinkable is divine and has real existence.

Prior analysed this argument representing the predicates “thinkable”, “perfect”, “divine and has real existence” in terms of formal logic. It is easy to see that this version of the argument is valid, although it may not convince the atheist.

Version 2 of the argument may be formulated in the following way:

Whatever is perfect is divine and has real existence.
It is thinkable that something is perfect.
Therefore:
Some thinkable is divine and has real existence.

Here, there is an important distinction between the uses of “thinkable” in the second premise and in the conclusion. Prior analyses this using modal logic, and he argues that this argument is invalid as it stated above. In order to produce a valid argument along these lines, we shall need an additional premise:

$$M(\exists xFx) \rightarrow \sum xFx$$

However, Prior pointed out that this additional premise is deeply problematic.

In what we may call version 3 of the ontological argument, Prior makes use of modal concepts:

God is an entity whose possibility necessarily implies its existence.
God’s existence is possible
Therefore:
God’s existence is necessary.

Prior argues that this argument can be represented in terms of modal logic. He demonstrates that it is valid in S5, but invalid in S4. For this reason an atheist would have either to reject the second premise claiming the God’s existence is not even possible or to reject S5 in this context.

References:

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