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Omnificence

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## Omnificence

JOHN BIGELOW

In the twentieth century, logical positivists maintained that any truth must be verifiable. It might be thought that you could articulate that thesis like this:

- (K1) For any proposition  $p$ ,  
if  $p$  then it is possible that someone knows that  $p$ .

A much-discussed proof, originating with Fitch 1963, demonstrates that (K1) entails:

- (K2) For any proposition  $p$ ,  
                   there is someone who knows that  $p$ .

This latter thesis (K2) should be congenial to the eighteenth century bishop George Berkeley, who defended the philosophical thesis of *idealism*: the thesis that everything that exists either *is* a thinking thing or else exists only *in* someone's mind.

Very briefly, the proof runs like this. Suppose (K1) were true for any proposition  $p$ , but (K2) were false. Then for any proposition  $p$  it would be possible that someone knows that  $p$ ; but there would be some proposition  $q$  such that  $q$  is true but no one knows that  $q$ . Substitute the true proposition ( $q$  and no one knows that  $q$ ) for  $p$  in (K1). Then you can apply Modus Ponens, and you can infer that: it is possible that someone knows that ( $q$  and no one knows that  $q$ ). Yet that is absurd. Therefore (K1) entails (K2).

Berkeley believed in an omniscient God, so he also believed:

- (K3) There is someone who knows every truth.

Berkeley justified (K3) in various ways; yet with help from Humberstone 1985 he could have proved (K3) by a quick deduction from (K2).

Very briefly, the proof runs like this. Suppose (K2) were true but (K3) false. Then for any proposition  $p$  there would be someone who knows that  $p$ ; but for each person  $x$  there would be some proposition  $q(x)$  that  $x$  does not know. Form the conjunction  $X$  of all the true propositions of the form ( $q(x)$  and  $x$  does not know that  $q(x)$ ). This conjunction will be true. Substitute this true conjunction for  $p$  in (K2). Then you can infer that there is someone  $y$  such that  $y$  knows that  $X$ . This means that  $y$  knows this conjunction  $X$  even though one of its conjuncts asserts that ( $q(y)$  and  $y$  does not know that  $q(y)$ ). Yet that is absurd. Therefore (K2) entails (K3).

Putting together these two proofs, from (K1), that every truth is knowable, we can prove (K3), that there is a being who knows every truth.

In *epistemic logic*, the Fitch paradox has been much studied, though the Humberstone paradox has been undeservedly neglected. The counterpart arguments in *action theory* have also been neglected. Yet manifestly the 'knower paradoxes' will have counterparts in action theory.

The knower paradoxes trade on some very simple formal features of the 'knows that' operator. Any operators that share those formal features will give rise to parallel paradoxes. Thus, for instance, Douglas Walton (1976) drew out some of the striking consequences of Fitch's paradox for questions concerning God's *omnipotence*. Humberstone (1985) explored some extensions of his own theorem to operators other than 'knows that', including *bringing-about* operators.

The Fitch and Humberstone derivations, when translated into action theory, will run as follows:

- (A1) For any contingent truth, it is possible that there is something  
that brought it about that it is so;  
therefore:  
(A2) For any contingent truth, there is something  
that brought it about that it is so;  
therefore:  
(A3) There is something that brought it about,  
for every contingent truth, that it is so.

According to tradition, when God brings it about that something is so, the way He does so is by commanding it; and whenever God commands that something be so, it is *obligatory* that it be so and it is not *permissible* for it to fail to be so. The logic of obligation and permission is called *deontic logic*. Hence the above argument may be called a *deontological argument*, and this is amusing because it calls to mind St. Anselm's notorious *ontological argument* for the existence of God.

It is surprising that (A1) entails (A2). It seems to say that if every event *could have had* a cause, then every event *did* have a cause. It is equally surprising that (A2) entails (A3). The conclusion (A3) is remarkably close to the thesis that there is a God, and indeed that there is a God of a very special sort.

Thinking of the etymology of the word 'magnificent', we might define the term 'omnificent' as follows: a being is *omnificent* just in case, for every contingent truth, this being brings it about that it is so. (The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists this word; and a variant, 'omnific', is cited as having been used by Milton.)

Omnificence is not to be confused with omnipotence. Theists generally hold that God is omnipotent, but not that God is omnificent. Perhaps some theists did hold that God is omnificent: maybe that is what Descartes and Leibniz and 'occasionalists' like Malebranche held, and possibly Bishop Berkeley, and perhaps also 'quasi-panteists' like Spinoza. Yet this is a minority view, even among theologians.

Atheists, along with many theologians, might be tempted to take the entailments from (A1) to (A2) to (A3) as a *reductio* refutation of the supposition that (A1) is true.

Yet suppose an atheist were to draw this conclusion. This would entail a commitment to the following:

- (A4) For some contingent truth, it is *impossible* that there is anything  
that brought it about that it is so.

This is an initially uncomfortable thesis for an atheist to have to accept. It amounts to a commitment to something that is – like God – *uncaused*, and *necessarily* uncaused, something reminiscent of the 'Unmoved Mover'

of Aristotle and Aquinas. Scientists are accustomed to assuming that every event has a cause, yet (A4) invites them to abandon that assumption.

Furthermore, the existence of this thing would be, *unlike* the existence of God, a contingent rather than a necessary truth. We would be driven to the conclusion that there is a *contingent* truth that nothing, *not even God*, could have brought about. Not only would this be something that neither God nor any of his creatures has *in fact* brought about, it also has to be something that they *could not* have brought about. At first blush, that seems almost as weird as the conclusion we are trying to avoid, that there is something that has brought *everything* about. Could there be a contingent truth that not even *God* could have brought about? Surely that is an uncomfortable thesis not only for atheists but for most theists too.

Thus if the Fitch-Humberstone reasoning were valid, then this would present a problem for both atheists and theists alike.

*Informal sketch of a proof of omnificence*

The premise (A1) is ambiguous. To stiffen up the initial proof, replace (A1)–(A3) by the following:

- (B1) There is a finite class of actual beings such that,  
     for any contingent proposition  $p$ ,  
     if  $p$  then  
     some being in this class *could have* brought it about that  $p$ .
- (B2) There is a finite class of actual beings such that,  
     for any contingent proposition  $p$ ,  
     if  $p$  then  
     some being in this class *did* bring it about that  $p$ .
- (B3) There is an actual being  $G$  such that,  
     for any contingent proposition  $p$ ,  
     if  $p$  then  $G$  brought it about that  $p$ .

*Proof that (B1) entails (B2)*

Suppose for *reductio* that (B1) did not entail (B2). This would mean that it would be possible for (B1) to be true and (B2) to be false.

For (B1) to be *true* would mean that:

- (1) For any contingent proposition  $p$  that is true in the actual world,  
     there is some actual being that *could* have brought it about  
     that  $p$ ;  
     meaning that:  
     for anything  $p$  that is the case in the actual world,  
     there is some being  $x$   
     who belongs to a finite class  $C$  of beings that exist in the actual  
     world,  
     and there is some other possible world  $w$ ,

and the being  $x$  exists both in the actual world and in world  $w$ ,  
 and  $p$  is true both in the actual world and in world  $w$ ,  
 and in world  $w$  it is the case that  $x$  (in  $w$ ) brought it about (in  
 $w$ ) that it is the case (in  $w$ ) that  $p$ .

(B2) requires that: For any contingent truth, there is some agent that brought it about. This means that: For any proposition  $q$ : if  $q$  then there is some agent that brought it about that  $q$ .

Thus, for (B2) to be *false* requires that: There is *some* proposition  $q$  such that:  $q$  and no agent brought it about that  $q$ . This means that for (B2) to be *false* is for there to be a proposition  $q$  such that:

- (2) The proposition ( $q$  and no one brought it about that  $q$ ) is true in the actual world.

If (1) is supposed to be true for any proposition  $p$  *whatsoever*, then it should hold even when we substitute ( $q$  and no one brought it about that  $q$ ) for  $p$ . Yet when we do this, it immediately follows that:

- (3) There is some actual agent such that  
                   it is possible that this agent brought it about that ( $q$   
                   and no one brought it about that  $q$ );

meaning that:

there is a possible world  $w$  and there is someone  $x$  who exists in world  $w$ , and in world  $w$  it is the case that  $x$  (in  $w$ ) brought it about (in  $w$ ) that it is the case (in  $w$ ) that:

- ( $q$  and no one brought it about that  $q$ ).

Yet (3) is absurd. *No* possible agent in *any* possible world can have *brought it about* in his or her world or in any other world that ( $q$  and *no one* brought it about that  $q$ ).

Thus (1) and (2) entail (3), which is absurd. Therefore (1) and (2) cannot both be true together. Therefore the truth of (1) entails the falsity of (2).

Hence (B1) entails (B2), *which is what was to be shown*.

*Proof that (B2) entails (B3)*

Suppose for *reductio* that (B2) did not entail (B3). That would mean that it is possible for (B2) to be true and (B3) false. This would mean that:

- (1) For every contingent truth  $p$ , someone brought it about that  $p$ ;  
 and yet:

- (2) For each person  $x$ ,  
           there is at least one corresponding proposition  $q(x)$  such that:  
                    $q(x)$  and yet  $x$  did not bring it about that  $q(x)$ .

Now consider the conjunction X of all the true propositions ( $q(x)$  and  $x$  did not bring it about that  $q(x)$ ). A conjunction of truths is true. Hence we can substitute the conjunction X for  $p$  in (1). It then follows from (1) that there is someone,  $y$ , who brought it about that X.

Then  $y$  brought it about that X; and yet, by (2),  $y$  did *not* bring it about that  $q(y)$ , which is one of the conjuncts in X. Yet this is absurd.

Therefore the supposition that (1) and (2) are both true leads to an absurd consequence. Therefore the truth of (1) entails the falsity of (2).

Hence (B2) entails (B3), *which is what was to be shown*.

### *Possible responses*

#### *Response 1:*

Wow! So there is an omnificent being!

#### *Rejoinder to Response 1:*

No, there isn't.

#### *Response 2:*

The argument successfully proves that there would have to be an omnificent being if every contingent truth could have been brought about by one of a *finite* stock of actual agents. Yet we do not need to believe in an omnificent being provided we accept that there are *infinitely many* actual agents.

#### *Rejoinder to Response 2:*

Response 2 would turn the argument into what is in effect a *reductio* proof that there are *infinitely many actual agents*. Yet that is absurd. A mathematical realist like me would be overjoyed to find an a priori proof that there is an infinite class of actual agents, but the above proof would be too good to be true.

Besides, I maintain that the Fitch and Humberstone argumentation would go through just as cogently even if we were to begin with an initial premiss that made reference to a *finite or infinite* class of actual agents. You should not be unduly frightened of infinite classes. The reasoning in the above proof of omnificence is structurally parallel to Cantor's 'diagonalization' argument for the surprising conclusion that the infinite number of possible *ratios* among physical quantities like length is *greater* than the infinite number of natural or 'counting' numbers. In the fully general case, reasoning of the above kind may sometimes depend on some assumption like the Axiom of Choice. Yet surely the rejection of an omnificent being should not depend on the falsity of the Axiom of Choice.

*Response 3:*

The argument successfully proves that there would have to be an omnificent being if every contingent truth could have been brought about by one of a (finite or infinite) stock of *actual* agents. Yet we do not need to believe in an omnificent being provided we begin from the alternative supposition that there are things that could have been brought about if, but only if, *there had been* some *extra* agents, agents which do not actually exist but which could have brought about the relevant things if they *had* existed.

*Rejoinder to Response 3:*

It is absurd to suppose that the rejection of an omnificent being depends on what could have been brought about by merely possible, non-actual agents.

Besides, I maintain that the above argumentation would go through just as cogently even if we were to have begun with an initial premiss that made reference to a (finite or infinite) class of *actual or non-actual* agents. There is nothing about Cantor diagonalization techniques, or the Axiom of Choice, that would preclude running the argument in a language in which we quantify evenhandedly over all actual and possible agents.

There is, however, room here for disagreement.

There are some philosophers who have held the theory that any agent that exists in any possible world must also exist in the actual world. This is a theory that might be congenial, for instance, to some of those who are sympathetic to the theory of D. M. Armstrong and others, that all possibilities are merely *recombinations* or *permutations* of the things that exist in the actual world. Armstrong tries to fine-tune his combinatorialism in such a way as to make room for 'possible agents' that do not exist in the actual world, at least as a *façon de parler*. However, it would have been neater if we could have stuck with a more simplistic combinatorialism, one according to which any agent in any possible world will have to be identified with one of the things that exists in the actual world.

Suppose a defender of such a simplistic combinatorialism were to try to block the conclusion that there is an omnificent agent. This defender would be unable to appeal to *non-actual* beings who could have brought about the contingent truths that none of the actual agents could have brought about. Response 3 suggests that the only way to block the conclusion that there is an omnificent being would be by appealing to non-actual beings of that kind.

Hence according to Response 3 a defender of a simplistic combinatorialism would be committed to the existence of an omnificent being. That would yield something effectively equivalent to a refutation by *reductio*

of a simplistic combinatory theory of that kind. This would provide a new proof that there are possible agents that do not exist in the actual world. This would be nice – but it is too good to be true. Avoidance of belief in an omniscient being does not depend on the denial of simplistic combinatory theories of possibility.

Hence I conclude that Response 3 is not a satisfactory response to the deontological argument for the existence of an omniscient being.

*Response 4:*

The argument is valid; but the most rational response is to conclude that the initial premiss is *false*. We should simply conclude that there are some tricky contingent truths that it is *impossible* for anything to have brought about. Yet this should not be so surprising on reflection, when you note that it only means that we have to admit ‘unbegotten’ contingent truths that are formulated in tricky and artificial constructions, such as the truth that such-and-such is the case but *nothing did* bring it about, and contingent truths such as the grand conjunction of *all* such tricky and artificial constructions.

Likewise, we should conclude that there are some tricky truths that it is *impossible* for anyone, even God, to have known. Yet this should not be so surprising on reflection, when you note that it only means that we have to admit unknowable truths that are tricky and artificial constructions, such as the truth that *nothing does* know such-and-such, and unknowable truths such as the grand conjunction of *all* such tricky and artificial constructions.

*Rejoinder to Response 4:*

In response to the Fitch argument, it is natural to protest that the principle that the logical positivists *really meant* to affirm is not quite the same as the proposition that the Fitch argument forces us to abandon. We must indeed abandon the supposition that tricky and artificial truths, such as that ‘such-and-such is true but unknown’, must be knowable. Yet this leaves open the possibility that all *basic* and *natural* truths are knowable. And this, it might plausibly be suggested, is what the verificationists had meant all along, when they said that any truth is knowable.

Likewise it might plausibly be suggested that, when philosophers said that ‘for every contingent truth there is something that brought it about’, what they really meant was that for any *basic* and *natural* contingent truth there is something that brought it about.

To sustain these contentions, however, it would be necessary to clarify the distinction between *basic* and *natural* truths on the one hand, and *tricky* and *artificial* truths on the other. The trouble is that a proposition

that can be very *simply* and *naturally* expressed in one language may look extremely tricky and artificial when you try to articulate it in some other language. It is then unclear whether that proposition is *basic* and *natural*, or not.

Furthermore, I am very sympathetic to the theory held by Cresswell, Stalnaker and others, that a proposition is just a set of possible worlds. Within this theory, there is no significant distinction between ‘basic’ propositions and ‘artificial logical constructions’. Hence in a theory of this kind it is not easy to sustain plausible *replacement* principles that ‘every *basic* truth could be known’, and that ‘every *basic* contingent truth was brought about by something’.

However, I am also sympathetic to the theory, held at one time by Russell when he was developing ‘logical atomism’, and more recently by Armstrong and others, that a proposition is some sort construction that can be built up out of particulars and universals. That theory, in contrast to the ‘sets of worlds’ theory, is one that does hold out some hope that it might be possible to find a significant distinction between ‘basic’ propositions and ‘artificial logical constructions’.

Nevertheless, it must be recognized that ‘logical atomism’ and related theories face many objections. Thus, there is reason for scepticism about whether it will be possible to sustain a theoretically robust distinction between ‘basic’ propositions and ‘artificial logical constructions’. This undermines confidence that we can find sustainable *replacements* for the premisses that lead to the existence of an omniscient being, and of an omnificent being.

#### *Reaffirmation of Response 4:*

Metaphysical worries raised by Russell and Armstrong and others should not distract us from the core moral to be drawn from the argumentation of Fitch and Humberstone. It would be nice to rescue the *spirit* of the traditional principles that ‘all truths are knowable’ and that ‘every event has a cause’. Nevertheless, whether or not that can be done, we have to recognize that many flatfooted articulations of those principles *would* entail the existence of an omniscient agent, and of an omnificent agent.

Hence we are driven to the following conclusion. Either there is an *omnificent being*, or else there are contingent truths that *could not have been brought about*.

I recommend that you memorize the former option by mnemonically associating it with the Biblical text from the *Book of Genesis*: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’. I recommend that the alternative option be remembered by mnemonically associating it with a text from Hesiod’s *Theogony*, in which a *parent* is named for

every single god except for the first four, and of these four: 'First came Chaos ...'.

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## Translating names

JOHN P. BURGESS

### 1. Millianism and anti-Millianism

Mill taught that the signification of a word has in general two components, denotation and connotation, but that in the special case of a proper name there is no connotation, and the signification of the word is just its denotation. According as 'meaning' is aligned with 'connotation' or with 'signification', this doctrine comes out as 'A proper name has no meaning' or as 'The meaning of a proper name is just its denotation.' Today 'Millianism' is most often used as a label for the latter version:

- (1) The meaning of a name is its denotation.

An immediate consequence of (1) is the following:

- (2) Two names with the same denotation have the same meaning.

An immediate objection to (2) is that different names for the same item may be distinguished in level (formal, familiar). Such features are very important for usage. (Imagine what a diplomatic *contretemps* would result if President Chirac were to write President Bush a letter beginning 'Yo, Dubya!') And with words that (unlike proper names) appear in dictionaries, such features are commonly noted in their definitions, presumably as part of the meaning of the word. It is therefore, the objector claims, reasonable to take them to be part of the meaning of a name as well.