

## The ontomystical argument revisited

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**Abstract** I argue that Alexander Pruss's ontomystical arguments should not be endorsed without further argumentative support of their premises. My specific targets are his claims that (i) Śamkara's principle is true and (ii) the high mystics had phenomenal experiences of radical dependence and as of a maximally great being. Against (i), I urge a host of counterexamples. The only ways I can see for Pruss to respond to these counterexamples end up falsifying (ii). The key problem which leads to this conclusion is that Pruss needs a criterion for distinguishing phenomenal experiences from non-phenomenal experiences according to which the experiences of the high mystics were phenomenal experiences while the experiences of those persons I discuss in my counterexamples to Śamkara's principle are not. There appears to be no such criterion. I suggest that the future of the ontomystical arguments lies in developing them as inductive rather than deductive arguments.

**Keywords** Śamkara's principle · Phenomenal experiences · Ontomystical argument · Ontological argument

### Introduction

In this paper, I argue that Alexander Pruss's ontomystical arguments which previously appeared in this journal<sup>1</sup> should not be endorsed without further argumentative support of their premises. I argue for this conclusion in three steps. First, I present and explain Pruss's ontomystical arguments (Sect. 'Outline of Pruss's arguments'). Second, I offer three criticisms of Pruss's arguments (Sects. 'The problem of the criterion',

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<sup>1</sup> Pruss (2001, pp. 111–120)

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‘Counterexamples to Śamkara’s principle’, and ‘Identifying modal experiences’). Third, I show how the three criticisms I have offered come together to show that the conclusion above follows (Sect. ‘The three criticisms together’). In the final section of the paper, I discuss the future of the ontomystical arguments (Sect. ‘Conclusion’). My view is that the arguments’ future is bleak, but not forlorn.

In order to ease my reader’s anxiety over what my three criticisms will be, I offer them in brief up front. First, Pruss’s presentation of the ontomystical arguments lacks a criterion for distinguishing between phenomenal and non-phenomenal experiences. The relevance of such a criterion will become plain in the discussion which follows. Second, there are plausible counterexamples to an important principle relied on by Pruss. This principle, called Śamkara’s principle, says that nothing which is phenomenally experienced is impossible. The third criticism points out that human beings are not terribly proficient at identifying experiences of modal properties. We often misidentify experiences which do not involve modal properties as ones which do. The relevance of this criticism, too, will soon become plain. Yet, before I delve further into these criticisms, and before I show in Sect. ‘The three criticisms together’ how they come together to yield the conclusion stated above, let me first offer a more detailed sketch of Pruss’s arguments.

### Outline of Pruss’s arguments

Pruss’s ontomystical arguments profitably combine ontological arguments with arguments from religious experience. Pruss points out that each of these two argument types, taken in isolation, suffers from evident difficulties. However, the two argument types may be combined together along with Śamkara’s principle to form a new sort of argument—the ontomystical argument—which does not suffer from the difficulties of the two former argument types taken in isolation.

Ontological arguments, for their part, suffer from lack of support for their possibility premises. Pruss mentions two such ontological arguments. The first is Alvin Plantinga’s argument,<sup>2</sup> stated as follows:

- (1) Necessarily, if  $x$  is a maximally great being, then  $x$  exists in all possible worlds and is perfectly good, omnipotent and omniscient in them all.
- (2) It is possible that there exists a maximally great being.
- (3) Therefore, there exists a maximally great being.

A second argument, the argument from radical dependence, Pruss states like this:

- (4) A being,  $x$ , is radically dependent on another being,  $y$ , if and only if it is an essential property of  $x$  that  $y$ ’s activity enters into a causal explanation of  $x$ ’s existence.
- (5) There is an actually existent person such that it is possible that this person is radically dependent on an essentially numinous and loving being.
- (6) Therefore, there actually exists an essentially numinous and loving being on whom at least one actually existent person is radically dependent.

<sup>2</sup> Plantinga (1982, Chap. 10).

It is the possibility premises (2) and (5) of these arguments which are the main subject of concern. Making use of Śamkara's principle and the argument from the religious experience of high mystics, Pruss endeavors to show that (2) and (5) are true and that the conclusions of these ontological arguments follow soundly from their premises.

Śamkara's principle says that "Nothing even appears to be like an impossibility."<sup>3</sup> As Pruss puts it, "what seems, could be." The idea is that any genuine phenomenal experience, whether veridical or not, is at least possible. Nothing which is phenomenally experienced is impossible. Pruss presents the final form of the principle as "whatever *really seems* to a subject, could be." The notion of "really seems" is defined as follows: "An  $x$  really seems to  $s$ ' is true if and only if  $s$  would be correctly identifying the content of a single phenomenal experience of hers if she were identifying it to be an  $x$ ."<sup>4</sup> Pruss introduces the notion of what "really seems" because he wants to guard against cases like phenomenally experiencing a living headless elephant, when presumably having a head is an essential feature of elephants. Although someone might claim that he is experiencing a living headless elephant, he is in fact experiencing an elephant-like living headless animal. The point is that for Śamkara's principle to apply to a person  $s$ 's seeming,  $s$  needs to correctly identify the content of the seeming.

Pruss next combines Śamkara's principle with the religious experience of the high mystics. Some mystics evidently had phenomenal experiences of a maximally great being or of being radically dependent on an essentially numinous and loving being. Whether or not these experiences were veridical is not the question. What is important is just that the mystics phenomenally experienced these things—it really seemed to them that there was a maximally great being or that they were radically dependent on an essentially numinous and loving being. By Śamkara's principle, then, it is possible that there is a maximally great being or that there is a person who is radically dependent on an essentially numinous and loving being. And thus we have support for the two contentious premises—(2) and (5)—of the two ontological arguments mentioned above. With these controversial premises supported, the ontological arguments are quite appealing. Nonetheless, in the next three sections I will offer criticisms of Pruss's support of these premises.

### The problem of the criterion

Pruss never supplies a criterion for distinguishing phenomenal experiences from non-phenomenal experiences. He notes on more than one occasion that it is of great importance that Śamkara's principle not be applied to just any sort of experience whatever. For instance, Pruss mentions as an apparent counterexample to the principle a dream he had in which it seemed to him he was presented with a mathematical proof of some proposition  $p$ . When he awoke from the dream, he realized that what he had thought was a proof was nonsense. Nevertheless, by Śamkara's Principle it seems to follow that it is possible that there be a proof of  $p$  and thus  $p$ . Pruss responds to this counterexample by noting that the experience he had of there being a proof of  $p$  was

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Chakrabarti (1995, p. 319).

<sup>4</sup> Pruss (2001, p. 116).

not a *phenomenal* experience of a proof of *p*. He misidentified a sequence as a proof of *p*. Pruss writes, “It is important for the defense of Śamkara’s principle that the word ‘seem’ or ‘appear’ have a very broadly perceptual connotation.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, Pruss is clear that we are to distinguish between broadly perceptual seemings and cognitive seemings.

The problem, however, is that Pruss never gives us any way of distinguishing perceptual or phenomenal seemings from non-perceptual or non-phenomenal seemings. If we are going to dismiss certain counterexamples to Śamkara’s principle because they are not perceptual or phenomenal seemings, we need some way to tell whether or not they are perceptual or phenomenal seemings. Not having such a criterion becomes something of a liability for Pruss when he is faced with responding to counterexamples to Śamkara’s principle, as we will see in Sect. ‘Counterexamples to Śamkara’s principle’.

Furthermore, not only would having such a criterion provide Pruss with a much needed defensive weapon, it would also present him with an offensive one. For instance, it would afford Pruss a ready response to an objection mentioned by Richard Gale. Gale suggested that it seemed to him that it is just impossible to have a phenomenal experience of a modal property.<sup>6</sup> If Pruss were in possession of a criterion for distinguishing phenomenal from non-phenomenal seemings, then he could perchance tell us whether Gale’s seeming is a phenomenal experience or not. Of course, if Gale’s experience is a phenomenal experience, then it is baldly self-defeating. Gale is claiming to phenomenally experience a modal property (that it is impossible to phenomenally experience modal properties) *and* that it is impossible to experience modal properties. We can see, then, that having such a criterion would be of great use to Pruss. Unfortunately, he does not provide one.

### Counterexamples to Śamkara’s principle

The second criticism is a more direct challenge to Pruss’s argument. It seems that there are counterexamples to Śamkara’s Principle. If so, Śamkara’s principle is false and Pruss’s support of the controversial premises of the ontological arguments will lose its force. I mention four plausible counterexamples.

First, many persons experience the world as if they can live without God. That is, it seems to many people that they could live even if God did not exist. They claim to experience not-radical dependence on God. But, by Śamkara’s principle, it is possible that these persons can live without God. For, in some possible world it is possible that these persons live without God, and whatever is possibly possible is possible. So, possibly God does not exist. But presumably God is to be conceived of as a necessary being. Either he exists in every possible world or he exists in none of them. So, since God doesn’t exist in at least one possible world, he doesn’t exist in any. So, God doesn’t exist. But Pruss believes that God does exist and that God is a necessary being. So, he will have to deny Śamkara’s principle.

<sup>5</sup> Pruss (2001, p. 115).

<sup>6</sup> Pruss (2001, p. 119).

Pruss might respond to this first example by claiming that those persons who claim to experience the world as if they can exist without God are not talking about *phenomenal* experiences. Instead, their experiences are cognitive in some way. They are not the broadly perceptual experiences to which Śamkara's principle is supposed to apply. The problem with this response is that, as we noted above, Pruss has given us no criterion for distinguishing between phenomenal and non-phenomenal experiences. Without such a criterion, there is little pull to accept the claim that the persons who experience the world as if they can exist without God are not having phenomenal experiences while the high mystics who experienced the world as if they were radically dependent on God were having phenomenal experiences. We simply don't know what this claim amounts to.

A second reply Pruss might make fares no better. He might just insist that those who say they experience the world as if they are not radically dependent on God are misidentifying their experience, whereas those who claim to experience radical dependence are correctly identifying their experience. The content of the phenomenal experience of the former group isn't what they claim it to be, whereas the content of the phenomenal experience of the latter group *is* what they claim it to be. The former group is like the person who claims to perceive a living headless elephant; the latter group is of a different category.

Yet, there seems very little motivation for thinking that the not-radical dependence claimants do not correctly identify their experience while the radical dependence claimants do correctly identify their experience. The only reason I can think of for why we should think this would have to make an appeal to independent evidence for theism over against atheism or some sort of diminished theism according to which God's existence is not necessary. We need some other sort of argument for why theism is correct and atheism or diminished theism incorrect if we are to embrace this objection. Indeed, Pruss seems to suggest this sort of reasoning in his paper. He considers the case of Eastern mystics who claim that their phenomenal experience of a being than which no greater can be conceived is of a being that is essentially impersonal. Thus, their experience is incompatible with theism. Pruss reasons that:

It is not implausible to suggest that some [Eastern] mystics may have misinterpreted their experiences on account of the properties they think a maximally great entity *should* have... But now we need to ask what properties are *in fact* great-making properties. I take it that it is highly plausible that omniscience, omnipotence and perfect goodness are all great-making properties. Indeed, I can hardly see how a non-personal reality can be said to be very great.<sup>7</sup>

Pruss thus arbitrates between two claims about phenomenal experiences which, if taken alongside Śamkara's principle would lead to incompatible results, by appealing to independent evidence for one of the claims over against the other. It seems that he would make the same move in rebutting the objection I have just raised about persons who experience not-radical dependence. Pruss would arbitrate between possible radical dependence and possible not-radical dependence by adducing independent

<sup>7</sup> Pruss (2001, p. 117).

considerations in favor of the former view. However, doing so seems to remove any importance which might have been attached to the ontomystical argument. For, it is no longer religious experience which is doing the real work of supporting the possibility premises of ontological arguments but some other *a posteriori* considerations which are. My point here is that it is no longer merely an appeal to religious experience and to Śamkara's principle which is supplying the support for (2) and (5). We need also some further philosophical evidence for the religious experiences themselves, and it looks as if it is this philosophical work which is now doing the heavy lifting for the argument.

My second counterexample is briefer. It seems to many teenagers as if they are immortal, i.e., that it is metaphysically impossible for them to die. At least, it seems to them as if it is metaphysically impossible for them to die in certain ways, e.g., in a car accident. (If you find this claim doubtful, ask their parents!) But, by Śamkara's principle, it is possible that they cannot die (in a car accident). So, by S5, they cannot die (in a car accident). But they do die (in car accidents, no less)! So, Śamkara's principle is false.

The two responses available to Pruss with regard to my first counterexample will also be available here. He might counter that these teenagers are not having phenomenal experiences. Of course, he will again face the difficulty of supplying a criterion for distinguishing phenomenal and non-phenomenal experiences. The second response above is more plausible here. Perhaps these teens are misidentifying the content of their experiences. They misidentify experiences of their cunning and strength as experiences of the modal property of immortality. Unfortunately, this response is also telling against Pruss's argument. I say more about why in the next section.

Third, many persons have claimed to experience individual instances of causation where A causes B as if A necessitates B.<sup>8</sup> For example, George might claim that his experience of the striking of the match causing the lighting of the match was an experience as of the striking of the match *necessitating* the lighting of the match. George phenomenally experienced the world as if *necessarily, if the striking of the match, then the lighting of the match*. By Śamkara's principle, it is possible that necessarily, if the striking of the match, then the lighting of the match. However, if it is possible that the striking of the match necessitates the lighting of the match, then the striking of the match necessitates the lighting of the match, by S5. So, in our own world, the striking of the match necessitates the lighting of the match. The problem with this is that it is almost certainly not the case that strikings of matches necessitate lightings of matches in our world. In general, the concepts of causation and necessity come apart quite easily. Hardly any philosopher nowadays would accept the consequence that the striking of the match necessitates the lighting of the match.<sup>9</sup> Even those who would accept this consequence would surely like a different sort of argument for this conclusion than just an appeal to phenomenal experiences and Śamkara's principle.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle *Metaphysics* 9.5. Also, see [Anscombe \(1971\)](#).

<sup>9</sup> [Anscombe \(1971\)](#).

Again, Pruss could either argue that those who claim to experience causes as necessitating either are not having phenomenal experiences or they are misidentifying the content of their experiences. We have seen the problem with adopting the first of these responses. The second response is better off, but it is still not strong. Pruss can insist that the person who claims to have phenomenally experienced a cause as necessitating has misidentified his experience. There may indeed be good reasons for thinking this to be the case. The classic arguments of Hume could be invoked here. Perhaps those who claim that they experience causes as necessitating are indeed misidentifying their experience. But if they are, then what reason do we have for thinking that the same isn't true of the high mystics? This question will play an important role in the next section.

My fourth and final counterexample is as follows. Assume that Kripke, Putnam et al. are correct in their claim that there are some empirical truths which are necessary truths, including the truth that *water is H<sub>2</sub>O*. It is no trouble to imagine the following scenario involving Sam, who we will suppose discovered that water is H<sub>2</sub>O. Just prior to discovering that water is H<sub>2</sub>O, Sam looked through his microscope at the molecular structure of water. There was a slight film on his lens which caused it to seem to him as if the molecular structure of water is in fact H<sub>3</sub>O. It really seemed to Sam that water is H<sub>3</sub>O. Thus, by Śamkara's principle, it is possible that water is H<sub>3</sub>O. But, according to our supposition, it is not possible that water is H<sub>3</sub>O. So, we must reject Śamkara's principle.

Again, the same responses which I mentioned above in regard to my first three counterexamples will be on the table for Pruss. As in those cases, however, it looks as if neither of these responses will prove attractive. If he insists that Sam's experience is not a phenomenal experience, his insisting will be totally lacking in force so long as he fails to offer a criterion for distinguishing between phenomenal and non-phenomenal experiences. If he insists that Sam has misidentified the content of his experience, we will wonder why it is that we should suppose this to be the case while supposing it not to be the case that the high mystics similarly misidentified their experiences. In the next section, I will pump some further intuitions for thinking that it may indeed be the case that the high mystics misidentified their experiences.

### Identifying modal experiences

The final criticism I mention is that it seems that human beings are not terribly proficient at correctly identifying experiences of modal properties. Instead, we regularly misidentify experiences which do not involve modal properties as experiences of modal properties. This fact should give us some pause in accepting that the experiences of the high mystics were experiences of modal properties. If their experiences were not experiences of modal properties—if they weren't experiences of *radical* dependence and experiences as of a *maximally* great being—then applying Śamkara's principle will not give us the desired support of the possibility premises of the ontomystical arguments.

I will mention two examples of misidentifying experiences of modal properties. First, people often talk as if tasks which are clearly possible were impossible. A

comparatively smaller and less athletic sports teach claims, “we can’t beat them”; a person claims of a very close friend who has been accused of a crime that “he could never have done that”; an overworked graduate student claims, “I can’t come to the party”; perhaps even the example mentioned in the previous section about teenagers is a good candidate here—they think, “I can’t be killed in a car accident.” Now, some of these examples might be cases where persons are speaking about psychological or causal or some other sort of less-than-metaphysical impossibility. But, I hope my reader will forgive me for indulging the suspicion that in at least some of these cases persons are making claims about what they experience as genuinely metaphysically impossible. If we were to attribute anything less to their claims, they might well insist that we had misunderstood. Of course, they quite likely have not phenomenally experienced modal properties of metaphysical impossibility. Rather, they have experienced the great difficulty or extraordinary unlikelihood of a task or event as if it were a modal property of metaphysical impossibility. So, it seems we have some indication that human beings are not terribly proficient at identifying experiences of modal properties.

A second example is the example of causation mentioned above. The best reply to the argument that phenomenal experiences of necessitating causes furnish a counterexample to Śamkara’s principle is to insist that those who claim to experience causes as necessitating are misidentifying their experiences. They are misidentifying experiences which do not involve modal properties as ones which do. All they really experience is the contingent fact of A’s hitting B or the like; they don’t experience the necessity of the conditional *if A then B*. The problem with this reply, however, is that if it is correct, it illustrates that human beings are unreliable in identifying experiences of modal properties. It shows that we are apt to misidentify non-modally charged experiences as modal ones. But, if this is the case, then what reason do we have for granting that the high mystics have correctly identified their experiences as experiences of modal properties? Why should we not think that they too have misidentified their experiences as experiences of modal properties?

Pruss is not without a reply to these difficult questions. He suggests that we should give the mystics the benefit of the doubt. We should give them this benefit because of the sheer number of highly intelligent mystics and the similarity of the content in the phenomenal experiences these mystics claim to have experienced. Pruss writes, “if there is widespread agreement among mystics of different theological persuasions about the apparent object of high mystical experiences having maximal greatness, we have reason to think that this agreement is grounded in the phenomenology of the experiences themselves, i.e., that these mystics are indeed having experiences *as of* a maximally great being.”<sup>10</sup> The problem with this response, though, is that the same criteria seem to be met equally well in the cases of those who claim to experience not-radical dependence or causes as necessitating. That is, there are large numbers of highly intelligent persons who claim to have very similar phenomenal experiences of not-radical dependence or causes as necessitating. So, if this defense of the controversial premises of the ontological arguments works, then the conclusions will also

<sup>10</sup> Pruss (2001, p. 117).

follow that God does not exist and that those who claim to have experienced striking of matches as necessitating lightings of matches are correct. The first of these conclusions is obviously contradictory to the conclusions of the ontological arguments, and the second is at the very least unwelcome.

### The three criticisms together

I have now offered my three criticisms of Pruss's ontomystical arguments. Here I summarize the relationship between these three criticisms.

I have urged some counterexamples to Śamkara's principle, such as the experience of causes as necessitating, the experience of not-radical dependence, the case of Sam, and the case of teenagers who seem to themselves immortal (criticism II). The only ways I can see for Pruss to respond to these counterexamples is to claim either that they are not phenomenal experiences or that they have been misidentified by their subjects as experiences of modal properties (or some combination of both responses). But both of these responses face difficulties.

If Pruss replies that these experiences are not phenomenal experiences, then we may insist that he provide some sort of criterion for distinguishing between phenomenal and non-phenomenal experiences (criticism I). We need not just any criterion, but one according to which the experiences of the high mystics qualify as phenomenal experiences and according to which the experiences of Sam and those who claim to have experienced not-radical dependence, causes as necessitating, or immortality do not qualify as phenomenal experiences. Perhaps Pruss can provide such a criterion. If he can, then we will need to see whether the experiences of the high mystics qualify as phenomenal experiences. It is not at all clear that they will.

If Pruss takes the second option and replies that these experiences are not of modal properties, then we may insist that this fact illustrates the general unreliability of human beings in correctly identifying experiences of modal properties (criticism III). If human beings are poor at picking out experiences of modal properties, then it seems we should ask for further evidence that the high mystics have correctly identified their experiences as experiences of modal properties. The further evidence we need cannot just be that these mystics were highly intelligent or that there were a great number of them or that their experiences shared many commonalities. For, these same features hold in the cases of not-radical dependence and causes as necessitating. Perhaps, though, there is some other feature of the experience of the high mystics which should persuade us that they were correctly identifying their experiences as experiences of modal properties. For now, it is unclear what this feature might be. Nonetheless, even if this further evidence were supplied, it seems as if Sam-style cases will remain. For, Sam's experience as described in the original case was not construed as an experience of a modal property. Regardless of the success of this second response to the other counterexamples, we will need the first response to be successful at ruling out Sam-style experiences. The second response, then, will not suffice.

My conclusion is this: without further support of their premises, we should not accept Pruss's ontomystical arguments. The premises I have in mind are (i) those

which claim that Śamkara's principle is true and (ii) those which claim that the mystics had phenomenal experiences of radical dependence and phenomenal experiences as of a maximally great being. Without some principled response to the counterexamples mentioned above which includes a criterion for distinguishing phenomenal from non-phenomenal experiences and some additional persuasive evidence for thinking that the mystics correctly identified their experiences as experiences of modal properties, these premises are insufficiently supported. For this reason, the ontomystical arguments should not be endorsed.

### Conclusion

I have argued above that we should not endorse the ontomystical arguments without further support of their premises. Let me now briefly remark upon the future of the ontomystical arguments. I suggest that this future is bleak, but not forlorn.

As deductive arguments, I think the future of the arguments is especially bleak. That future depends upon finding a criterion for distinguishing phenomenal experiences from non-phenomenal experiences which will give us the desired results. This seems unlikely at present, but perhaps an account will become available.

A more interesting future is a future in which the ontomystical arguments are rehashed as non-deductive arguments. I'm not sure exactly how this would go, but I will offer a sketch. We begin by considering independent evidence for theism over against the apparent counterexamples I have mentioned in this paper (not-radical dependence, immortality, causes as necessitating, and Sam's case). We then supply a principle according to which it is more likely that a given experience is a phenomenal experience if it is supported by our other available evidence. We conclude that it is more likely that the high mystics had the experiences they claimed to have had than it is that Sam and the others had the experiences they claim. We then tinker with Śamkara's principle so that it tells us that for any two apparent phenomenal experiences with contradictory implications (such as radical dependence and the experience of immortality), if one is more likely to in fact be a phenomenal experience than the other then it is more likely to be possible. We then infer that the experiences of the high mystics are more likely to be possible than the experiences of not-radical dependence and immortality. The final step is to conclude by a principle like S5 that it is more likely that (3) and (6) are true than not. This principle would need to say something like, where some experience of a necessary truth  $x$  is more likely possible than another experience of a necessary truth  $y$ , it is more likely that  $x$  is necessarily true than that  $y$  is. Concluding in this way that (3) and (6) are more likely true than not is no trivial conclusion.

The ontomystical arguments, then, are not dead. But I think they have been dealt a serious blow. We need either an ingenious account of phenomenal experiences and a defense of the reliability of the high mystics in picking out their experiences or a rehashing of the ontomystical arguments as non-deductive arguments.

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