A VALID ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT?

I WISH to discuss Professor Malcolm's absorbingly powerful defense of a version of Anselm's ontological proof for the existence of God.[1] Professor Malcolm believes "that in Anselm's *Proslogion* and *Responsio editoris* there are two different pieces of reasoning which he did not distinguish from one another, and that a good deal of light may be shed on the philosophical problem of 'the ontological argument' if we do distinguish them" (p. 41). One of these pieces of reasoning is what is usually referred to as Anselm's ontological argument; Malcolm agrees with a tradition beginning with Gaunilo in rejecting that argument. But it is the other argument with which Malcolm is particularly concerned; this one, he believes, is a perfectly sound argument for the existence of God.

I shall not be concerned with the question whether Malcolm has interpreted Anselm correctly, nor shall I discuss his criticism of Kant's refutation of the ontological argument, though I believe that his criticism is mistaken. Instead I shall stick to Malcolm's exposition of this hitherto unnoticed version of the ontological argument, hoping to show that the argument is invalid and that its conclusion (that God's existence is logically necessary) is false. In essence, the proof is an attempt to deduce God's necessary existence from our conception of Him as a being than which none greater can be conceived by showing "that the notion of contingent existence or of contingent non-existence cannot have any application to God" (p. 49). Malcolm's account of the proof falls into two parts: an exposition and expansion of Anselm's argument (pp. 45-48) and a summary of it (pp. 49-50). In order to get the argument in its entirety before us, I shall begin by examining the summary.

Let me summarize the proof. If God, a being a greater than which cannot be conceived, does not exist then He cannot *come* into existence. For if He did He would either have been *caused* to come into existence or have *happened* to come into existence, and in either case He would be a limited being, which by our conception of Him He is not. Since He cannot come into existence, *if He does not exist His existence is impossible* [my italics]. If He does exist He cannot have come into existence (for the reasons given), nor can He cease to exist, for nothing could cause Him to cease to exist nor could it just happen that he ceased to exist. So *if God exists His existence is necessary* [italics mine].

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[1] "Anselm's Ontological Arguments," *Philosophical Review*, LXIX, (1960), 41-62.

Thus God's existence is either impossible or necessary. It can be the former only if the concept of such a being is self-contradictory or in some way logically absurd. Assuming that this is not so, it follows that He necessarily exists [pp. 49-50].

The structure of the main argument here seems to be the following:

    (1) If God does not exist, His existence is logically impossible.
    (2) If God does exist, His existence is logically necessary.
    (3) Hence either God's existence is logically impossible or it is logically necessary.
    (4) If God's existence is logically impossible, the concept of God is contradictory.
    (5) The concept of God is not contradictory.
    (6) Therefore God's existence is logically necessary.

(3), I take it, is equivalent to the assertion that "the notion of contingent existence or of contingent nonexistence cannot have any application to God" (p. 49); and in fact (3) follows from (1) and (2). Before examining the argument for (1) and (2), however, I wish to consider the intended meaning of the phrase "logically necessary" as it occurs in the proof. A normal inclination would be to understand the assertion "God's existence is logically necessary" as equivalent to the assertion "The proposition 'God exists' is logically necessary." I think this is Malcolm's intention:

> It may be helpful to express ourselves in the following way: to say, not that *omnipotence* is a property of God, but rather that *necessary omnipotence* is; and to say, not that omniscience is a property of God, but rather that *necessary omniscience* is. We have criteria for determining that a man knows this and that and can do this and that, and for determining that one man has greater knowledge and abilities in a certain subject than another. . . . That God is omniscient and omnipotent has not been determined by the application of criteria: rather these are requirements of our conception of Him. They are internal properties of the concept, although they are also rightly said to be properties of God. *Necessary existence* is a property of God in the *same sense* that *necessary omnipotence* and *necessary omniscience* are His properties [p. 50].

It is a requirement of our conception of God that He is omnipotent; it is merely putting this point a different way, I believe, to say that the proposition "God is omnipotent" is logically necessary. The sense in which necessary omnipotence is a property of God is that the proposition "God is omnipotent" is necessary. And necessary existence, says Malcolm, is a property of God in the same sense in which necessary omnipotence and necessary omniscience, are. To say "God necessarily exists," then, is to say the same as " 'God exists' is a necessary propo-

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sition." This interpretation receives confirmation from the following sentence: "The a priori proposition 'God necessarily exists' entails the proposition 'God exists,' if and only if the latter also is understood as an a priori proposition: in which case the two propositions are equivalent" (p. 50). Taking "logically necessary" and "a priori" as synonyms here, this passage seems to mean that "God necessarily exists" is equivalent to " 'God exists' is necessary." I am assuming further that for Malcolm a proposition is logically necessary if and only if its contradictory is self-contradictory. If Malcolm's reconstruction of Anselm's argument is correct, therefore, the proposition "God does not exist" is self-contradictory.

I turn now to premises (1) and (2) of the argument as outlined above. The first step in the argument given in the summary for (1) is to show that from the conception of God as the greatest conceivable being it follows that it is logically impossible for God to come (or to have come) into existence. For if He had either been caused to come into existence, or merely happened to come into existence, He would be a limited being. This inference seems quite correct; it follows from our conception of God that:

(a) N^2 (God never has and never will come into existence).

In the summary Malcolm apparently deduces (1) from (a). But this seems to be a mistake; for (a) does not entail (1) although it entails a proposition similar in some respects to the latter. Taking (a) and the antecedent of (1) as premises and the consequent of (1) as the conclusion, the deduction of (1) from (a) is equivalent to the following argument:

(a) N (God never has and never will come into existence).
(1a) God does not exist—antecedent of (1).
Therefore
(1c) N (God does not exist)—consequent of (1).

But (1c) does not follow from (a) and (1a). What does follow is (1c'): God never will exist. That is, the proposition "It is logically necessary that God never comes into existence" entails:

(1') N (If there is a time at which God does not exist, then there is no subsequent time at which He does exist).

But (1'), of course, cannot play the role assigned to (1) in Malcolm's argument, for (1') cannot help to show that the notion of contingent

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[2] The letter "N" before a proposition signifies that the proposition is logically necessary.

existence does not apply to God. The argument for (1) in the summary seems invalid, then.

In the exposition of the proof there seem to be two different though related arguments whose conclusions entail (1). I believe that Malcolm's reply to the above criticism would be to appeal to one of these arguments. The one I am referring to runs along the following lines: if God did not exist, and if the fact that He did not were merely contingent, then either He is prevented from existing or He merely happens not to exist. But it is contrary to the concept of God to suppose that anything could prevent Him from existing; and if the supposition that He merely happens not to exist is consistent, then if He did exist He would have "mere duration rather than eternity." But it is a requirement of our concept of God that He is an eternal Being; hence it cannot be true both that God does not exist and that the proposition "God does not exist" is logically contingent. I shall consider this argument after examining the argument in the summary for premise (2) of the proof.

(2) is deduced from (a) (see above) together with (b):

    (b) N (God never has and never will cease to exist).

(b), like (a), is deduced from the proposition that God is a being than which no greater can be conceived. Taking (a) and (b) together with the antecedent of (2) as premises and the consequent of (2) as conclusion we get the following inference:

    (a) N (God never has and never will begin to exist).

    (b) N (God never has and never will cease to exist).

    (2a) God exists—antecedent of (2).

Therefore

    (2c) N (God exists)— consequent of (2).

Once again it is apparent that (2c) does not follow from (a), (b), and (2a). What does follow is:

    (2c') God always has existed and always will exist.

To put it differently, (a) and (b) together entail the following necessary conditional:

    (2') N (If at *any* time God exists, then at *every* time God exists). If God cannot (logically) come into or go out of existence, it is a necessary truth that if He ever exists, He always exists. But it does not follow that if He exists, the proposition "God exists" is necessary. The correct definition of "God" might contain or entail that He never comes into or goes out of existence, in which case it would be a necessary truth that He never has and never will either begin or cease to exist.

But nothing has been said to show that the fact, if it is a fact, that there is a being so defined is a necessary fact. The argument given in the summary for (2), then, is also invalid.

Allow me to venture a guess as to the origin of the confusion here. One way of advertising the necessary truth of a conditional, in English, is to inject some modal term into the consequent. We might say, for example, "If Jones is a bachelor, he can't be married"; and in so saying, of course, we do not mean to assert that if Jones is a bachelor, the proposition "Jones is unmarried" is necessary. What we do mean is that "If Jones is a bachelor, he is unmarried" is necessary. Similarly here: it is a necessary truth that if God exists, He always has and always will. A normal though misleading way of putting this is to say: if God exists, He cannot fail to exist eternally. But the assertion which is equivalent to my (2′) above, and which does follow from (a) and (b), should not be confused with (2) which does not so follow.

Now the argument given in the summary for (1) and (2) contains an omission. Malcolm argues that God cannot merely happen to begin to exist nor merely happen to cease to exist, and also that He cannot have been caused either to begin to exist or to cease to exist. But he does not consider the possibility that it just happens that God always has and always will exist (and so happens neither to begin nor cease existing, nor is caused either to begin or cease existing), nor does he consider the possibility that it just happens that God never has existed and never will exist. Malcolm's reply, as I have intimated, is that if either of these were the case, then if God exists, He has mere duration rather than eternity. After arguing that it is contrary to the concept of God to suppose that He depends upon anything for existence or that He could be prevented from existing, Malcolm considers the possibility that God just happens to exist:

Some may be inclined to object that although nothing could prevent God's existence, still it might just *happen* that He did not exist. And if He did exist that too would be by chance. I think, however, that from the supposition that it could happen that God did not exist it would follow that, if He existed, He would have mere duration and not eternity. It would make sense to ask, "How long has He existed?," "Will He still exist next week?," "He was in existence yesterday but how about today?," and so on. It seems absurd to make God the subject of such questions. According to our ordinary conception of Him, He is an eternal being. And eternity does not mean endless duration, as Spinoza noted. To ascribe eternity to something is to exclude as senseless all sentences that imply that it has duration [p. 48].

The principle of this argument seems to be the contention that if God merely happened to exist He would have duration rather than

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eternity. In order to see whether the argument holds up we must ask what it is to "happen to exist" and what it is to have mere duration rather than eternity. Now Malcolm appears to be using the locution "happens to exist" in such a way that the proposition "God just happens to exist" is equivalent to the conjunction of the following four propositions:

God just happens to exist ≡ (a) God exists.
                                 (b) "God exists" is logically contingent.
                                 (c) God is not caused to exist.
                                 (d) "God is not caused to exist" is logically necessary.

I am not sure about the inclusion of (d), but my argument will hold without it. The situation with respect to the terms "duration" and "eternity" is not quite so clear, unfortunately. But at any rate the last sentence of the above quotation makes it apparent that if something has eternity, it does not have duration. We must therefore inquire what it is to have duration. First of all it appears that if God had duration it would make sense to ask "How long has He existed?," "He was in existence yesterday, but how about today?," and so forth. Now Malcolm is quite correct, surely, in holding that such questions cannot sensibly be asked about God. But he seems mistaken in inferring the sensibility of these questions from the proposition that God just happens to exist. Let us agree that our normal conception of God includes or entails that He is not caused to exist and that His existence has neither beginning nor end. It will then be true and necessarily true that:

(7) If God exists, then there is a being whose existence is not caused and who has neither beginning nor end.

The whole conditional is necessary, but we have no reason so far for supposing that either its antecedent or its consequent is. It may be a logically contingent truth, if it is a truth, that there actually is a being so conceived. And if God, so defined, does exist, the four conditions I suggested as constituting the meaning of "God happens to exist" will all be fulfilled. But the question "How long has God existed?" will not "make sense." For in asking the question one implies that He does exist. And the assertion that God exists entails the assertion that He has always existed. Hence anyone who understands the question already knows the answer; to ask that question seriously is to betray misapprehension of the concept of God. Similarly the

question "Will He still exist next week?" will be absurd. For it also implies that He does exist; but in the conception suggested above the conjunction "He does exist now, but next week He will no longer exist" is contradictory. Hence I conclude that "God merely happens to exist" does not entail that God has duration in any sense involving the logical propriety of questions of the sort Malcolm mentions.

Further on in the same passage, however, there seems to be a slightly different sense of "duration" introduced:

> If a thing has duration then it would be merely a *contingent* fact, if it was a fact, that its duration was endless. The moon could have endless duration but not eternity. If something has endless duration it will *make sense* (although it will be false) to say that it will cease to exist, and it will make sense (although it will be false) to say that something will *cause* it to cease to exist. A being with endless duration is not, therefore, an absolutely unlimited being [p. 48].

Here it is suggested that the assertion "God has duration" has three components. That assertion entails (a) that any statement specifying the temporal limits of God's existence is contingent, (b) that "God will cease to exist" is sensible, and (c) that "God will be caused to cease to exist" is sensible. (c) appears to entail (b); perhaps it is also meant to entail (a), but I leave that question on one side. Now it seems clear that the proposition "God merely happens to exist," understood as above, does not entail (b). If an adequate definition of "God" includes or entails that He never comes into or goes out of existence, it obviously will not "make sense" to suppose that God will cease to exist. For "God will cease to exist" entails "There is a time at which God exists and a later time at which He does not." But under the definition in question that proposition is contradictory. Hence the supposition that God merely happens to exist does not entail (b). Nor does it entail (c), since (c) entails (b).

The situation with respect to (a) is a bit more complicated. Suppose we take the assertion:

(8) God has neither beginning nor end

as a specification of God's temporal limits in the somewhat Pickwickian sense that it denies any such limits to His existence. There are two possible interpretations of this proposition:

(8a) If God exists, then He has always existed and will always exist; and

(8b) God does exist and He always ,has existed and always will exist.

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On the interpretation I have been suggesting, (8a) is logically necessary; (8b) is contingent, though each of its conjuncts entails the remaining two. Accepting the second interpretation of (8), then, we might say that the proposition "God merely happens to exist" entails that God has duration. But this is a weak sense indeed of "duration"; in fact to say that God has duration in that sense is to say no more than that "God exists" is logically contingent—which, after all, was the essential component of the contention that God merely happens to exist. In particular this in no way implies that questions of the sort Malcolm mentions are legitimate; nor does having duration in this sense constitute a limitation. It is a mistake, therefore, to suppose that God's happening to exist is inconsistent with His being "that than which none greater can be conceived."

Malcolm supports the argument I have just criticized by an exegesis of a passage in Anselm's *Responsio I*:

In *Responsio I* Anselm adds the following acute point: if you can conceive of a certain thing and this thing does not exist then if it *were* to exist its non-existence would be *possible*. It follows, I believe, that if the thing were to exist it would depend on other things both for coming into and continuing in existence, and also that it would have duration and not eternity. Therefore it would not be, either in reality or in conception, an unlimited being [p. 48].

The first point here seems to be that the proposition "God can be conceived but does not exist" entails the proposition "If God existed, His nonexistence would be possible." This seems correct. But Malcolm draws the further inference that if God were to exist, then He would "depend upon other things" and would have mere duration rather than eternity. This argument comes to the following:

(9) If the existence of God were logically contingent, God would depend upon other beings both for coming into existence and for continuing in existence, and God would have duration rather than eternity.

I believe I have already shown that from the supposition that God's existence is logically contingent it does not follow that He has duration rather than eternity, except in the trivial sense in which predicating duration of God is saying no more than that the proposition "God exists" is logically contingent. But it seems equally clear that God's dependence upon other things does not follow from the supposition that His existence is logically contingent. Malcolm states his argument in such a way that any statement of contingent existence

entails that the subject of the statement depends upon other things both for coming into and for continuing in existence. But this is surely a mistake. For all we know, certain elementary physical particles—for example, electrons—may always have existed, in which case they surely don't depend upon anything for coming into existence. And for all we know there may be nothing upon which they depend for their continued existence. But of course it would not follow from the truth of these suppositions that the statement "Electrons don't exist" is self-contradictory, or that the existence of electrons is logically necessary.

Perhaps Malcolm had the following in mind here: even if electrons depend upon nothing at all for coming into or continuing in existence the assertion that they do not so depend is contingent. But the assertion that God does not depend upon anything is necessary. And it is inconsistent to hold both that God's existence is contingent and that it is a necessary truth that He depends upon nothing at all either for coming into or for continuing in existence. I think this is the heart of Malcolm's argument. But I must confess inability to see the inconsistency. Malcolm is entirely correct in taking it that the proposition "God does not depend upon anything for coming into or continuing in existence" is logically necessary. As he says, the necessity of this proposition follows from the fact that God is conceived, in the Hebraic-Christian tradition, as a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. And hence an adequate definition of the word "God" must include or entail that He is dependent upon nothing whatever. But the assertion that a being so defined exists, that the definition actually applies to something, may well be, for all that Malcolm and Anselm have said, a contingent assertion. It is a necessary truth that if God exists, then there is a being who neither comes into nor goes out of existence and who is in no way dependent upon anything else. But from this it does not follow, contrary to Malcolm's argument, that the proposition "There is a being who neither comes into nor goes out of existence and who depends upon nothing" is necessary; nor does it follow that "God exists" is necessary. Malcolm's reconstruction of the ontological argument therefore fails.

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