

Singapore Management University

## Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

---

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

---

6-1992

### Ontological Disproof of God's Existence

John N. WILLIAMS

Singapore Management University, johnwilliams@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass\\_research](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research)



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

#### Citation

WILLIAMS, John N..(1992). Ontological Disproof of God's Existence. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 70(2), 204-210.

Available at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass\\_research/253](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research/253)

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email [cherylids@smu.edu.sg](mailto:cherylids@smu.edu.sg).

## ONTOLOGICAL DISPROOF OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

John N. Williams

### I. Hume's Principle

In *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*<sup>1</sup> Hume says:

Nothing is demonstrable unless the contrary implies a contradiction.  
Whatever we conceive of as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent.  
There is no being therefore whose non-existence implies a contradiction.  
Consequently, there is no being whose existence is demonstrable.

An initial reading of Hume's Principle is that no necessary truth can be denied without contradiction, whereas all existential propositions can. Therefore it is self-contradictory to say that any existential claim is necessarily true, since it follows that this claim both can and cannot be denied without self-contradiction. Thus any claim of the form 'X necessarily exists' is a self-contradiction, even if X is God.

The first half of the principle is certainly true. *All bachelors are unmarried* is a necessary truth because its denial is *Some bachelors are married*, which asserts that there is some bachelor or *unmarried* man who is married. The second half of the principle is at least plausible, for we can *consistently* imagine as non-existent any thing which indisputably exists, e.g. Melbourne.

### II. Findlay's Ontological Disproof

Findlay's Ontological *Disproof*<sup>2</sup> of God's existence uses Hume's Principle:

The religious frame of mind, . . . seems invincibly determined both to eat its cake and have it. It desires the Divine Existence both to have the inescapable character which can, on Kantian or modern views, only be found where truth reflects a connection of characteristics . . . and also the character of 'making a real difference' which is only possible where truth doesn't have this merely hypothetical or linguistic basis . . . It was indeed an ill-day for Anselm when he hit upon his proof. For on that day he not only laid bare something which is of the essence of an adequate religious object, but also something which entails its necessary non-existence.

The 'inescapable character . . .' is necessary truth. A bachelor is 'inescapably' unmarried given the 'linguistic basis' of the term 'bachelor'. The claim that

<sup>1</sup> *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (ed.) N. Kemp Smith (London: Nelson, 1947) p. 189.

<sup>2</sup> J.N. Findlay, 'Can God's Existence Be Disproved?', *Mind* 57 (1948) p. 182.

'making a real difference' is only possible where 'truth doesn't have this merely hypothetical or linguistic basis' is the claim that no statement about the world, for example an assertion that some entity exists, can be a *necessary* truth. This is a plausible claim if one looks at the obvious examples of necessary truths. The necessary truth *Either it is raining or it is not* tells us no fact about the world. It makes no 'real difference'. Here Findlay adopts Hume's Principle; he claims that *no thing exists necessarily*. But the claim that *God exists* is a necessary truth 'is of the essence of an adequate religious object'. Findlay thinks the necessity of God's existence is part of His *definition*, otherwise we would not be talking about a being worthy of worship. This too is at least plausible for it is odd to say 'God exists, but He may not exist tomorrow'. Believers might insist that trust or faith must be placed in something permanent. Here Findlay salvages what is left of Anselm's Modal Argument; not the misguided attempt to define God into existence, but rather the insight that *if God exists, then He exists necessarily*. But this is to 'have one's cake and eat it' for these two observations together 'entail . . . [God's] . . . necessary non-existence'.

Findlay's Disproof can be summarised as:

P1) *No thing exists necessarily.*

P2) *If God exists then He exists necessarily.*

---

C)  $\therefore$  *God necessarily does not exist.*

### III. Is the Disproof Meaningful?

The inclusion of the necessity operator in the conclusion has attracted criticism. Hartshorne<sup>3</sup>, for example, argues that if it makes sense to talk about God's necessary *non-existence* then it makes sense to talk about God's necessary *existence*. Thus if Findlay's conclusion makes sense then P1 cannot be supported by the claim that it is nonsense to say of any existential claim that it is necessarily true. Contrapositively, if it makes *no* sense to speak of God's necessary *existence* then it makes *no* sense to speak of God's necessary *non-existence*. Thus if P1 is true because it *is* nonsense to assert necessarily true existential claims, then the conclusion is likewise nonsense. Now it looks as if it is *Findlay's* argument that is 'determined both to eat its cake and have it'.

Hartshorne appeals to the general principle that if 'X' makes sense then so does 'Not-X'<sup>4</sup>. This is certainly true. It makes sense to talk of 'counterfeit coins' only because it makes sense to talk of 'genuine coins', since to say that a coin is counterfeit is to say that it is *not genuine*. Contrapositively, one cannot transform nonsense into sense merely by prefixing it with a grammatical negation.

Nonetheless, this criticism is doubly flawed.

First, the general principle is irrelevant to Findlay's Disproof. P1 is grounded by Hume's Principle, which does *not* assert that it is *nonsense* to make a necessary existential claim but rather that it is *self-contradictory*, since such a

<sup>3</sup> C. Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery* (Illinois: Open Court 1965) pp. 255-261.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J.A. Passmore, *Philosophical Reasoning* (London: Duckworth, 1961) pp. 100-118.

claim is one which *both can and cannot* be consistently denied. Findlay's reason for saying that *no* thing has necessary existence is not that the notion of 'necessary existence' is meaningless but rather that it is internally inconsistent. On this view it is coherent but self-contradictory to make any claim of the form 'X necessarily exists'.

Of course, this would be no objection given the intuition that all self-contradictions are meaningless. But this intuition is mistaken for two main reasons.<sup>5</sup> In fact all self-contradictions are *meaningful*.

First, if self-contradictions are meaningless then tautologies are not true. Hartshorne himself must appeal to the fact that to 'deny' a piece of nonsense is itself nonsense. But since tautologies are denials of self-contradictions then if self-contradictions are nonsensical, so are tautologies. To deny the self-contradiction *It is heavier and not heavier than 10 kilos* is to assert the tautology *Either it is heavier than 10 kilos or it is not*. And if tautologies are meaningless then they are not true. But this is absurd. Tautologies are the *paradigm* of truth.

Second, and relatedly, we know that a statement like 'John is a married bachelor' is false, only because we know that it is a self-contradiction. But we know that it is a self-contradiction only because we know what it means. Unlike an *explicit* self-contradiction, a grasp of its content, not its form, is needed. And if we know what it means then it has a meaning for us to know. On the other hand, we cannot make judgements about the truth-value of semantically nonsensical utterances like 'Mat the on is cat the'.

There are two important sources of blindness to the distinction. First, we might doubt that self-contradictory utterances like 'John is a married bachelor' have meanings on the grounds that they cannot be given. But counterintuitively, we *can* give the meaning of this apparently recalcitrant utterance, for it means that John is both married and unmarried and also both a bachelor and a non-bachelor. A possible objection to this is that this is no explanation, since it is neither informative nor different from the original utterance. But it is at least *different in form* from the original statement, because it, but not the original statement, has the form of a conjunction of explicit self-contradictions. And it follows that my explanation *may* be informative. Suppose that someone seriously *asserts* the original statement because that person either does not know that it *is* a self-contradiction or because he or she does not know that being unmarried is an essential part of bachelorhood. In this case my explanation may remedy both instances of ignorance. But even if my explanation *is* uninformative, this is no objection. Although it is uninformative to say that 'Jack is taller than Jill' means that Jill is shorter than Jack, it is nonetheless true. Nor will it do to insist that the explanation means nothing different from the original utterance, for then it follows that the original utterance *has* a meaning. Note also that the explanation is a logical consequence of the original statement, and this shows that it is not nonsense, for we cannot draw logical consequences from genuine nonsense.

<sup>5</sup> N. Cooper, 'Inconsistency', *Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1966) pp. 54-58, J.N. Williams, 'Believing the Self-contradictory', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 19 (1982) pp. 279-285.

A second source of the blindness is that we cannot imagine what it would be like for such statements to be true. Moreover, 'conceive' is ambiguous between 'imagine' and 'have the concept of', so that the fact that it is *unimaginable* that John is a married bachelor tempts us to fallaciously assume that this is *impossible to conceptualise*, in which case 'John is a married bachelor' is conceptually empty or meaningless. But unimaginability does not entail unconceptualisability. 'Space is infinite' expresses something unimaginable, since any picture of space which I have in my mind's eye is always a picture of *finite* space. But we can explain what it is for space to be infinite by saying that for any two points A and B, there is some third point which is further from A than B is. And we always have the concept of what we explain.

The second flaw in Hartshorne's criticism is that his general principle is misapplied to Findlay's argument. His principle was that to deny nonsense is nonsense. But the denial of 'X exists necessarily' is 'X does not exist necessarily', not 'X non-exists necessarily', yet Findlay's conclusion is of the latter form.

In summary, no reason has been given for thinking the Disproof meaningless.

#### IV. Is the Disproof Internally Consistent?

This criticism of Hartshorne lays the ground for a stronger attack on Findlay's Disproof, namely that the conclusion is inconsistent with Hume's Principle. For the initial reading of Hume's Principle we have been using so far, is that it is a contradiction to say of *any* existential claim — whether a 'positive' claim that some thing *does* exist, or a 'negative' claim that some thing *does not* — that it is necessary. From this initial reading it follows that any claim of the form 'X exists necessarily' is a self-contradiction, which supports P1, but it also follows that any claim of the form 'X non-exists necessarily' is a contradiction too. If the Principle is true under this reading then Findlay's conclusion is not nonsense, but self-contradictory.

There are only two ways to save the Disproof from this attack — by simply removing the troublesome necessity operator from the conclusion or by rejecting the initial reading of Hume's Principle. Although the first way is tempting, it is the second that should be taken.

The first way is tempting because a nonmodal conclusion is all that seems validly derivable. So Findlay's new Disproof would be:

P1) No thing exists necessarily.

P2) If God exists then He exists necessarily.

---

C') ∴ God does not exist.

Little seems lost by this removal, since God's existence is disproved equally well. Moreover, it looks as if Findlay ought to stick with a nonmodal conclusion, since strengthening C' to C seems to require a claim that cannot be supported. C' entails that either God non-exists contingently or necessarily. So C could be derived by claiming that if God non-exists then He non-exists necessarily. But

support for this claim cannot come from P2, since *If God exists then there is a self-contradiction in supposing that He does not* is formally consistent with *God does not exist but there is no self-contradiction in supposing that He does*. 'Ordinary language' considerations might appear to support it, given the oddity of 'God does not exist but He might tomorrow'. But even if pragmatic oddity were a guarantee of logical impossibility, this tensed remark is at best evidence that if God non-exists then He non-exists at all points in time, rather than evidence that if He non-exists then a denial of His existence is self-contradictory.

But in fact Findlay *cannot* remove the necessity operator. This is not because it can be demonstrated that if God non-exists then His non-existence is logically necessary, but because consistency demands that he holds his premisses as *necessary* truths and because any conclusion that validly follows from necessary truths is itself a necessary truth.

To say that an argument is valid is to say that in any possible world in which the premisses are true, the conclusion is true. But if the premisses are necessarily true, i.e. true in *all* possible worlds, then the conclusion is true in all possible worlds.

Findlay must hold his premisses as necessary truths. P1 is grounded by Hume's Principle which says that any assertion of the form 'X exists necessarily' is a self-contradiction, since such an assertion says that the claim that X exists, both can and cannot be consistently denied. But if it is a self-contradiction to say of *any* thing that it exists necessarily, then it is a necessary truth that *no* thing exists necessarily. Thus if Hume's Principle is true, P1 is *necessarily* true.

Now consider P2, which asserts that if God exists then He exists necessarily. If this is true, it cannot *just so happen* that it is true, especially for Findlay who asserts it because he thinks that necessary existence is 'of the *essence* [my emphasis] of an adequate religious object'. If the necessity of God's existence is part of the *definition* of 'God', then it is *true by definition* that if God exists then He exists necessarily. To be consistent, Findlay must claim that P2 is *necessarily* true.

So Findlay must retain the necessity operator in his conclusion, which is rendered self-contradictory by Hume's Principle under its initial reading. The correct defence of the Disproof at this point is to reject the initial reading of Hume's Principle. Hume certainly claims that all *positive* existential claims can be consistently denied, and this is at least plausible. But this does not claim that all *negative* existential claims can be consistently denied. 'Round squares *don't* exist' is true, and cannot be consistently denied, precisely because the concept of a round square is inconsistent. Indeed, on the initial reading the Principle is arguably self-refuting, since as already argued, it is necessary if true, and one way of expressing it is as 'There exist no necessary existential claims', which *appears* to be an *existential* claim. Thus when Hume's Principle is given the more sensible reading that no *positive* existential claim is necessary, then Findlay's conclusion, which is a necessary *negative* existential claim, is consistent with it.

In summary, no reason has been given for thinking the Disproof internally inconsistent.

## V. Is the Disproof Sound?

Is P2 true? Notice that throughout this discussion we have made the Humean assumption that 'necessity' means 'logical necessity'. But a kind of necessity which might more plausibly be part of God's essence is *factual* necessity. So 'God exists necessarily' does not mean ' $\square$  *God exists*', but rather that He is an entity which both exists at all points in time and is not dependent upon any other entity for His existence.

One syntactic difference between logical and factual necessity is that 'God is factually necessary' cannot be parsed as 'It is factually necessary that God exists'. A logical difference is that to claim, for example, that certain sub-atomic particles require no cause for their permanence, is not to claim that their existence is *logically* necessary, since there is no inconsistency in supposing them non-existent. Likewise, factual necessity might be a defining characteristic of God, but this does not entail that His existence is logically necessary, since there is no *logical* blunder in supposing that this factually necessary being does not exist.

Is it part of God's essence that He is factually necessary? It seems clear that it is part of the theistic definition of 'God' that He exists at all points in time. This does not guarantee that God is non-dependent upon any other entity, since it is consistent to describe entities which exist at all points in time, but which depend for this permanence upon some other being. For example, Hercules was a mortal who was granted immortality by a greater being, the god Zeus. A being might exist at all points in time under the eye of some superior being with the forever unexercised power to extinguish this lesser being. But a defining characteristic of God is omnipotence, which precludes the possibility of such a superior being with the power to maintain or terminate His existence. Any being that depends upon another for its existence is *limited* by it, and no omnipotent being can be thus limited.

So if 'necessary' means 'factually necessary' in P2 then it is true, indeed necessarily true. But if P1 is to be supported by Hume's Principle then it must talk of *logical* necessity, in which case the Disproof is invalid. This ambiguity could be avoided by insisting that P1 is the claim that no thing has *factually* necessary existence, but then it would either be false, if there *are* things such as the sub-atomic particles already discussed, or there would be no *a priori* basis for accepting it. Alternatively, if both premises talk of logical necessity then P2 is unsupported. Assuming that God exists, then He exists as a factually necessary being. But it does not follow from his factual necessity that *God does not exist* is a self-contradiction.

Finally, does Hume's Principle really support the Disproof?

First, even if Hume's Principle is true, its use is question-begging. A defender of Anselm could consistently insist that *God exists* is one particular positive existential claim which is logically necessary and is therefore a *counterexample* to Hume's Principle. Second, *There exists a prime number between 4 and 6* seems to falsify the Principle, since it is apparently an existential claim and

moreover cannot be consistently denied, since it is a matter of definition that 5 is between 4 and 6, and that 5 is prime.

The Principle could be defended by observing that *if* numbers and propositions exist, they do not exist *in the same way* as such non-mysterious entities as tables. So it can be modified to assert that no positive claim about the existence of *observable* entities type-identical with tables rather than with numbers or propositions, is necessarily true. Now the Principle is immune from the example, since the existence of the number 5 is not a matter of observation. But now that this modification has been made, does it still support Findlay's Disproof? Now it reads:

P') *No observable thing exists necessarily.*

P2) *If God exists then He exists necessarily.*

---

C) *Necessarily, God does not exist.*

But now the Disproof is invalid, unless 'God' is the name of an *observable* entity, which seems difficult to reconcile with His essential incorporeality. For the same reason, the Principle will not even work against the modal *proof* of God's existence.

## VI. Conclusion

Findlay's Disproof is coherent and consistent, but unsound or ungrounded. Either it is invalid or its premisses contain falsehoods or claims which cannot be supported.

*Singapore*