

*Anselm and Actuality*¹

DAVID LEWIS

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT LOS ANGELES

1. INTRODUCTION

Philosophy abounds in troublesome modal arguments—endlessly debated, perennially plausible, perennially suspect. The standards of validity for modal reasoning have long been unclear; they become clear only when we provide a semantic analysis of modal logic by reference to possible worlds and to possible things therein.² Thus insofar as we understand modal reasoning at all, we understand it as disguised reasoning about possible beings. But if these are intelligible enough to provide modal logic with foundations, they are intelligible enough to be talked about explicitly. Modal reasoning can be replaced by nonmodal, ordinary reasoning about possible things. Given an obscure modal argument, we can translate it into a nonmodal argument—or into several nonmodal arguments, if the given argument was ambiguous. Once we have a nonmodal argument, we have clear standards of validity; and once we have nonmodal translations of the premises, we can understand them well enough to judge whether they are credible. Foremost among our modal headaches is Anselm's ontological argument. How does it fare under the translation treatment I have prescribed? It turns out to have two principal nonmodal translations. One is valid; the other has credible premises; the difference between the two is subtle. No wonder the argument has never been decisively refuted; no wonder it has never convinced the infidel.

¹ I am grateful to Alvin Plantinga for his criticisms of an earlier version of this paper.

² See, for instance, Saul Kripke, "Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic," *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 16 (1963): 83-94.

2. FORMULATION OF THE ARGUMENT

The ontological argument notoriously comes in countless versions. We shall confine our attention to one of the arguments that can, with some plausibility, be extracted from Chapter II of the *Proslogion*—not the only one, but the one I take to be both simplest and soundest. The reader must judge for himself whether what I say can be adapted to his own favorite ontological argument.

The version we shall work on has the merit of bypassing some familiar difficulties that are not at the heart of the matter. It will have no chance to be invalid in some of the ways that ontological arguments have been said to be invalid. The proper name “God” will not appear, so we will not have to worry about the form or content of its definition. In fact, there will be no defining of anything. We will also not have to worry about the logic of definite descriptions. If I say “That which is red is not green” I might just mean “Whatever is red is not green,” neither implying nor presupposing that at least or at most one thing is red. Similarly, we can construe Anselm’s “that, than which nothing greater can be conceived” not as a definite description but rather as an idiom of universal quantification.

Our argument is as follows:

- Premise 1.* Whatever exists in the understanding can be conceived to exist in reality.
- Premise 2.* Whatever exists in the understanding would be greater if it existed in reality than if it did not.
- Premise 3.* Something exists in the understanding, than which nothing greater can be conceived.
- Conclusion.* Something exists in reality, than which nothing greater can be conceived.

3. THE FIRST PREMISE

It is our plan to reason explicitly about possible worlds and possible things therein. These possible beings will be included in our domain of discourse. The idioms of quantification, therefore, will be understood as ranging over all the beings we wish to talk about, whether existent or nonexistent.

In the context at hand, the appropriate sense of possibility is conceivability. Possible worlds are conceivable worlds. If some otherwise possible worlds are inconceivable—say, seventeen-dimen-

sional worlds—we should not count those; whereas if some otherwise impossible worlds are conceivable—say, worlds in which there is a largest prime—we should count those. Given any statement about what may be conceived to be the case, we translate it into a statement about what is the case in some conceivable world.

Thus to say that something can be conceived to exist in reality is to say that in some conceivable world, it does exist. This makes sense only if existence is taken to be a relation between beings and worlds, so that we can say that something exists in one world but not in another.³

Premise 1 tells us that whatever exists in the understanding exists in some conceivable world or other. Thus the beings that may be said to exist in the understanding are among the beings we have already admitted into our domain of discourse. It is ill-advised to speak of them as existing in the understanding; they do not bear to the understanding the same relation which something existing in a world bears to that world! Let us simply call them *understandable* beings.

We are ready now to give a nonmodal translation of Premise 1, as follows:

$$1. \forall x(Ux \supset \exists w(Ww \ \& \ xEw))$$

(For any understandable being x , there is a world w such that x exists in w .)

Is the premise credible? I have no wish to contest it. Someone might say that a round square is an understandable being that does not exist in any conceivable world; and perhaps there is enough latitude in the notions of understandability and conceivability so that he might be within his rights. But the ontological arguer who construes those notions so that Premise 1 is a necessary truth is also within his rights, and that is what matters. It is not for me, but for the ontological arguer, to explain what existing in the understanding is supposed to be, and what is supposed to be the relation between the existence in one's understanding of a possible being and one's understanding of some or all descriptions that would apply to that being. I am willing to grant that he can give some adequate account.

³ We will not need to settle the question whether anything—or any non-abstract thing—ever exists in more than one world, or in none, or partly in one and partly in another. For consideration of such questions, see my "Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic," *Journal of Philosophy* 65 (1968): 113-126.

He might wish to do so in such a way that the understandability of a given possible being is a contingent matter, so that a being might be *understandable in* one world but not in another. I may grant him this; but we shall only be concerned with actual understandability, understandability in the actual world. Hence the predicate “U” need not be relativized to worlds.⁴

4. THE SECOND PREMISE

In some versions of the ontological argument, it seems that a hypothetical nonexistent God is supposed to be excelled in greatness by some *other* conceivable being: one that exists, but otherwise is just like the hypothetical nonexistent God. I am unable to see how this strategy could yield an argument close enough to soundness to be interesting. Moreover, it is not Anselm’s strategy; he writes: “For suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then *it* can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater.” What excels a hypothetical nonexistent God is not some other being; it is that same being, conceived as existent.

To capture this idea, beings must have their greatnesses relative to worlds. Premise 2 says that any understandable being is greater in worlds in which it exists than in worlds in which it does not. We have the following nonmodal translation of Premise 2:

$$2. \forall x \forall w \forall v (Ux \& Ww \& Wv \& xEw \& \sim xEv. \supset xwGxv)$$

(For any understandable being *x*, and for any worlds *w* and *v*, if *x* exists in *w* but *x* does not exist in *v*, then the greatness of *x* in *w* exceeds the greatness of *x* in *v*.)

We need not regard the seeming hypostatization of greatnesses as more than a figure of speech, since we can take “the greatness of . . . in . . . exceeds the greatness of . . . in . . .” as an indivisible 4-place predicate.

I have no wish to dispute the second premise. In saying what makes for greatness, the ontological arguer is merely expounding his standards of greatness. Within wide limits, he is entitled to whatever standards of greatness he wants. All we can demand is that he stick to fixed standards throughout his argument, and throughout

⁴ Similar remarks apply to “W”. The ontological arguer might choose to explain conceivability in such a way that a world sometimes is *conceivable from* one world but not from another. However, we will be concerned only with actual conceivability of worlds; that is, conceivability from the actual world.

his subsequent account of the theological significance of the conclusion thereof.

5. THE THIRD PREMISE

The third premise says that there is some understandable being x whose greatness cannot be conceived to be exceeded by the greatness of anything. That is, the greatness of x is not exceeded by the greatness in any conceivable world w of any being y . We have seen that greatnesses, as thought of by the ontological arguer, belong to beings paired with worlds; according to the third premise, no such pair has a greatness exceeding the greatness of a certain understandable being x .

But if greatnesses belong to beings relative to worlds, what are we talking about when we say: the greatness of x ? *Which* greatness of x ? The greatness of x in which conceivable world? Different answers to the question yield different nonmodal translations of Premise 3.

We might construe Premise 3 as saying that what is unexceeded is the *actual* greatness of x , the greatness of x here in the actual world. If we speak of the greatness of something without mentioning a world, surely we ordinarily mean its greatness in the actual world; for we are ordinarily not talking about any worlds except the actual world. So it is plausible that even when other worlds *are* under discussion, we are speaking about the actual world unless we say otherwise. Thus, introducing a name “@” for the actual world, we obtain this first nonmodal translation of Premise 3:

3A. $\exists x (Ux \& \sim \exists w \exists y (Ww \& ywGx@))$

(There is an understandable being x , such that for no world w and being y does the greatness of y in w exceed the greatness of x in the actual world.)

Alternatively, we might construe Premise 3 as saying something weaker: that what is unexceeded is the *greatest* greatness of x , the greatness of x in any one of the worlds in which x is at its greatest. That is equivalent to saying merely that the greatness of x in some world v is unexceeded; for if the greatness of x in v is unexceeded, v is one of the worlds in which x is at its greatest. Thus we obtain a second nonmodal translation of Premise 3:

3B. $\exists x \exists v (Ux \& Wv \& \sim \exists w \exists y (Ww \& ywGxv))$

(There are an understandable being x and a world v , such that for no world w and being y does the greatness of y in w exceed the greatness of x in v .)

Or we might construe Premise 3 as saying something stronger: that what is unexceeded is *any* greatness of x , the greatness of x in any world whatever. Thus we obtain a third nonmodal translation of Premise 3:

3C. $\exists x (Ux \& \sim \exists v \exists w \exists y (Wv \& Ww \& ywGxv))$

(There is an understandable being x such that for no worlds v and w and being y does the greatness of y in w exceed the greatness of x in v .)

Under the auxiliary premise 4, which we shall take for granted henceforth,

4. $W@$

(The actual world is a world.)

3C implies 3A, but not conversely, and 3A implies 3B, but not conversely.

Perhaps there is one more possibility: For any world w , the greatness in w of x is not exceeded by the greatness in w of anything. Thus we obtain a fourth translation:

3D. $\exists x (Ux \& \sim \exists w \exists y (Ww \& ywGxw))$

(There is an understandable being x such that for no world w and being y does the greatness of y in w exceed the greatness of x in w .)

3D is not a plausible translation, since it might be true even if the greatness of anything x in any world w is exceeded by the greatness of something else elsewhere.

Premise 3B, at least, is moderately credible. It says that there is a highest grade of greatness, and that this grade of greatness is occupied, in some world, by an understandable being. If, above some level, we were prepared to discriminate only finitely many grades of greatness (no matter how many), and if we were prepared to admit that any grade of greatness, however high, could be occupied by an understandable being, then we would thereby be committed to accepting 3B. I have no wish to dispute 3B.

We postpone consideration of the credibility of the stronger translations 3A and 3C of Premise 3. We will not need to consider whether 3D is credible.

6. THE CONCLUSION

The conclusion says that there is some being x , existing in the actual world, whose greatness cannot be conceived to be exceeded by the greatness of anything. (We need not add that x is an understandable being, though that would follow if the rest did.) That is, the greatness of x is not exceeded by the greatness in any conceivable world w of any being y .

We ask again: *which* greatness of x ? But this time the answer clearly should be: the *actual* greatness of x , the greatness of x here in the actual world. Other versions of the conclusion would either imply this version or be of no theological interest. The fool would not mind being convinced that there is an actual being who might conceivably have been—is, in some conceivable world—of unexcelled greatness. So our nonmodal translation of the conclusion resembles 3A, our first version of Premise 3:

$$C. \exists x (x E @ \& \sim \exists w \exists y (Ww \& ywGx@))$$

(There is a being x existing in the actual world such that for no world w and being y does the greatness of y in w exceed the greatness of x in the actual world.)

7. VALIDITY OF THE ARGUMENT

We now have four precise, nonmodal translations of our original argument, one for each alternative translation of Premise 3. It is a routine matter to determine, by ordinary nonmodal logic, which are valid and which are not. It turns out that the arguments from 3A and 3C.

$$\frac{1, 2, 3A, 4}{\therefore C}$$

$$\frac{1, 2, 3C, 4}{\therefore C}$$

are valid, whereas the arguments from 3B and 3D

$$\frac{1, 2, 3B, 4}{\therefore C}$$

$$\frac{1, 2, 3D, 4}{\therefore C}$$

are not valid. Hence, we shall not consider the arguments from 3B and 3D further, despite the moderate credibility of 3B. Moreover, since 3C implies 3A and the argument from 3A is already valid, we need not consider the argument from 3C separately. Rather, we shall regard the inference from 3C to 3A as a possible preliminary to the argument from 3A, and ask whether 3C has any credibility to pass on to 3A.

8. CREDIBILITY OF THE THIRD PREMISE

The success of our form of the ontological argument therefore turns out to depend on the credibility of 3A, our first nonmodal translation of the premise that something exists in the understanding, than which nothing greater can be conceived. Why might an ontological arguer accept 3A?

He might infer 3A from 3C, if 3C were credible. Why might he accept 3C?

He might infer 3C from premises he accepts concerning the existence and nature of God. But in that case he could not argue from 3C without circularity.

He might assume that for every description he understands, there is some understandable being answering to that description. But what of such well-understood descriptions as "largest prime" or "round square"? Possibly he can give some account of understandable beings such that one of them answers to any understood description; but if so, we can hardly continue to grant him Premise 1, according to which every understandable being can be conceived to exist. Premise 1 is indispensable to the argument from 3C, since without Premise 1, 3C might be true by virtue of a supremely great understandable being existing in no conceivable world.

He might obtain 3C by using the following *Principle of Saturation*: any sentence saying that there exists an understandable being of so-and-so description is true unless provably false. Such a principle would, of course, permit a much simpler ontological argument than ours: apply it to the description "Divine being existing in every world". But the Principle of Saturation can as easily be used to refute 3C as to defend it. Consider the sentence (*) saying that there is an understandable being which is greater than anything else in some world, but is exceeded in greatness in another world.

$$(*) \exists x \exists w \exists v (Ux \& Ww \& Wv \& \forall y (y \neq x \supset xwGyw) \\ \& \exists y yvGxv)$$

If the Principle of Saturation supports 3C,⁵ it should equally well support (*); otherwise it makes a discrimination unjustified by any visibly relevant difference between 3C and (*). But (*) is incompatible with 3C. So if the Principle of Saturation supports 3C, then it is a bad principle.

I know of no other way to defend 3C. Therefore let us turn to the question whether 3A, unsupported by 3C, is credible in its own right.

The ontological arguer might accept 3A with or without also accepting G, a generalization over all worlds of which 3A is the instance pertaining to the actual world.

$$G. \forall v (Wv \supset \exists x (Ux \& \sim \exists w \exists y (Ww \& ywGxv)))$$

(For any world v , there is an understandable being x such that for no world w and being y does the greatness of y in w exceed the greatness of x in v .)

Why might he accept G? He might infer it from 3C; but we know of no noncircular reasons for him to believe 3C. Unless inferred from 3C, G does not seem credible. Let v be a bad world—say, one containing nothing but a small chunk of mud—and let w be the most splendid conceivable world. Then according to G there is some understandable being whose greatness in v is unexceeded by the greatness in w of anything—even the greatest of the inhabitants of w . What could this understandable being be? By 1 and 2 (which the ontological arguer accepts) it is something that exists in v . Is it part of the mud? Or is it an abstract entity that exists everywhere? If the latter, then there is no reason for it to be especially great at v , while if it is equally great everywhere then we are back to arguing from 3C. It seems that in order to believe G without inferring it from 3C, the ontological arguer would need to adopt standards of greatness so eccentric as to rob his conclusion of its expected theological import. If some mud in its mud-world is deemed to be as great as the greatest angel in his heavenly world, then it does not

⁵ I argue conditionally since we cannot say whether the Principle of Saturation supports 3C (and (*)) until we have formulated the Principle more precisely. In particular, we would have to settle whether the provability mentioned in the Principle is to include provability by means of the Principle itself.

matter whether or not something exists in reality than which nothing greater—by *these* standards of greatness—can be conceived.

If the ontological arguer accepts 3A without also accepting G, then he is claiming that the actual world possesses a distinction which at least some other worlds lack: the actual world is one of those worlds at which something achieves a greatness unexceeded by the greatness of anything anywhere. For short: the actual world unlike some other worlds, is a *place of greatest greatness*. Why is this credible? What is special about the actual world, compared to some others, that should lead us to think it a place of greatest greatness?

It will not do for the ontological arguer to cite various features of the actual world that impress him: its tall mountains, beautiful women, wise philosophers or what not. In the first place, the actual world is greatly excelled in all such respects by other worlds—it is possible for mountains to be taller than they actually are, and so on. In the second place, the ontological arguer is not supposed to be giving us empirical theology; we wish to know whether his premises are at all credible *a priori*.

It remains for the ontological arguer to hold that the actual world is special, and a fitting place of greatest greatness, precisely because it, alone out of the worlds, is actual. This reason seems *prima facie* to have some force: whatever actuality may be, it is something we deem tremendously important, and there *is* only one world that has it. We picture the actual world—indefensibly—as the one solid, vivid, energetic world among innumerable ghostly, faded, wispy, “merely” possible worlds. Therefore it may well seem plausible that the actual world, being special by its unique actuality, might also be special by being a place of greatest greatness. This does not pretend to be a proof of 3A, but we do not demand proof; we wish to know if the ontological arguer has any reason at all to accept 3A, even a reason that does no more than appeal to his sense of fitness.

9. THE NATURE OF ACTUALITY

But this last reason to accept 3A is not only weak; it is mistaken. It is true that our world alone is ‘actual’; but that does not make our world special, radically different from all other worlds.

I suggest that “actual” and its cognates should be analyzed as *indexical* terms: terms whose reference varies, depending on

relevant features of the context of utterance. The relevant feature of context, for the term "actual", is the world at which a given utterance occurs. According to the indexical analysis I propose, "actual" (in its primary sense) refers at any world w to the world w . "Actual" is analogous to "present", an indexical term whose reference varies depending on a different feature of context: "present" refers at any time t to the time t . "Actual" is analogous also to "here", "I", "you", "this", and "aforementioned"—indexical terms depending for their reference respectively on the place, the speaker, the intended audience, the speaker's acts of pointing, and the foregoing discourse.⁶

I do not mean to say that "actual" has different meanings in the languages used in different worlds, so that for any world w , "the actual world" is a proper name of w in the native language of w . That is false. (Just as it would be false to say that "today" changes its meaning every midnight.) Rather, the *fixed* meaning we give to "actual" is such that, at any world w , "actual" refers in *our* language to w .

I use "refers" broadly to cover various semantic relations for indexical terms of various grammatical categories. To speak more precisely: at any world w , the name "the actual world" *denotes* or *names* w ; the predicate "is actual" *designates* or *is true of* w and whatever exists in w ; the operator "actually" *is true of* propositions true at w , and so on for cognate terms of other categories. Similarly, at any time t the name "the present time" denotes t , the predicate "is present" is true of t and whatever exists at t , the operator "presently" is true of propositions true at t , and so on.

A complication: we can distinguish primary and secondary senses of "actual" by asking what world "actual" refers to at a world w in a context in which some other world v is under consideration. In the primary sense, it still refers to w , as in "If Max ate less, he would be thinner than he actually is". In the secondary sense it shifts its reference to the world v under consideration, as in "If Max ate less, he would actually enjoy himself more". A similar distinction occurs among temporal indexicals: the unaccompanied present tense does, and the present tense accompanied by "now" does not,

⁶ For a general account of indexicality, see Richard Montague, "Pragmatics," *Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Raymond 'Klibansky (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1968). A. N. Prior states the indexical analysis of actuality in "Modal Logic and the Logic of Applicability," *Theoria* 34 (1968): 191-2; but, sadly, he goes on to say "this seems a tall story, and . . . I doubt whether anyone seriously believes it."

tend to shift its reference from the time of an utterance to another time under consideration.⁷ “It will be the case in 2100 A.D. that there are men on Mars,” said now, is probably true, whereas “It will be the case in 2100 A.D. that there are now men on Mars,” said now, is probably false. The secondary, shifting sense of “actual” is responsible for our translation 3D. If we set out on the route that leads to 3A, we get “There is an understandable being *x*, such that for no world *w* and being *y* does the greatness of *y* in *w* exceed the actual greatness of *x*.” Then if we take “actual” in the secondary sense, it shifts from referring to our own world to referring to the world *w* under consideration, thereby yielding 3D rather than 3A.

The strongest evidence for the indexical analysis of actuality is that it explains why skepticism about our own actuality is absurd. How do we know that we are not the unactualized possible inhabitants of some unactualized possible world? We can give no evidence: whatever feature of our world we may mention, it is shared by other worlds that are not actual. Some unactualized grass is no less green, some unactualized dollars buy no less (unactualized) bread, some unactualized philosophers are no less sure they are actual. Either we know in some utterly mysterious way that we are actual; or we do not know it at all.

But of course we do know it. The indexical analysis of actuality explains how we know it: in the same way I know that I am me, that *this* time is the present, or that I am here. All such sentences as “This is the actual world,” “I am actual,” “I actually exist,” and the like are true on any possible occasion of utterance in any possible world. That is why skepticism about our own actuality is absurd.

“This is the actual world” is true whenever uttered in any possible world. That is not to say, of course, that all worlds are actual. “All worlds are actual” is *false* whenever uttered in any world. Everyone may truly call his own world actual, but no one, wherever located, may truly call all the worlds actual. It is the same with time. Sometimes it seems to the novice that indexical analysts of “present” are pretending that all times alike are present. But no: although “This time is present” is always true, “All times are present” is never true. If we take a timeless point of view and ignore our own location in time, the big difference between the present time and other times vanishes. That is not because we regard all

⁷ I owe this distinction to J. A. W. Kamp, “The treatment of ‘now’ as a 1-place sentential operator” (1967, unpublished). It is discussed also by A. N. Prior in “Now,” *Nous* 2 (1968): 101-119.

times as equally present, but rather because if we ignore our own location among the worlds we cannot use temporally indexical terms like “present” at all. And similarly, I claim, if we take an *a priori* point of view and ignore our own location in time, the big difference between the actual world and other worlds should vanish. That is not because we regard all worlds as equally actual⁸ but rather because if we ignore our own location among the worlds we cannot use indexical terms like “actual”.

If I am right, the ontological arguer who says that his world is special because his world alone is the actual world is as foolish as a man who boasts that he has the special fortune to be alive at a unique moment in history: the present. The actual world is not special in itself, but only in the special relation it bears to the ontological arguer. Other worlds bear the same relation to other ontological arguers. The ontological arguer has no reason to regard his own actual world as special except in its relation to him. Hence he has not even a weak reason to think that his world differs from some other worlds in being a place of greatest greatness—that is, not even a weak reason to accept 3A without also accepting its generalization G. We have already found that he has no reason to accept G without 3C and no good, non-circular reason to accept 3C. We should conclude, therefore, that the argument from 3A is a valid argument from a premise we have no non-circular reason to accept.

10. CONCLUSION

Of the alternative non-modal translations of our ontological argument, the best are the arguments from 3A and 3B. The premises of the argument from 3B enjoy some credibility, but the argument is invalid. The argument from 3A is valid, but 3A derives its credibility entirely from the illusion that because our world alone is actual, therefore our world is radically different from all other worlds—special in a way that makes it a fitting place of greatest greatness. But once we recognize the indexical nature of actuality, the illusion is broken and the credibility of 3A evaporates. It is true of *any* world, at that world but not elsewhere, that that world alone

⁸ Prior slips here in presenting the indexical analysis (as a tall story). He writes, “this word ‘actual’ must not be taken as signifying that the world in question is any more ‘real’ than those other worlds . . .” But “real” (even in scare-quotes) is presumably indexical in the same way as “actual”. Hence we can no more say that all worlds are equally real than we can say that all worlds alike are actual.

is actual. The world an ontological arguer calls actual is special only in that the ontological arguer resides there—and it is no great distinction for a world to harbor an ontological arguer. Think of an ontological arguer in some dismally mediocre world—there are such ontological arguers—arguing that his world alone is actual, hence special, hence a fitting place of greatest greatness, hence a world wherein something exists than which no greater can be conceived to exist. He is wrong to argue thus. So are we.