

Anselm and Aslan: C. S. Lewis and the Ontological Argument

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“We trust not because ‘a God’ exists, but because this God exists” (“Obstinacy” 25).

“But who is Aslan? Do you know him?”

“Well, he knows me,” said Edmund (VDT 117).

Introduction

C. S. Lewis wrote his brother Warnie on 24 October 1931 that “God might be defined as ‘a Being who spends his time having his existence proved and disproved’” (*Letters* 2:7). The jocular definition reminds us that we could easily get the impression from listening to the interminable debates on the subject that the first question of theology is whether God exists. But if theology begins from God’s having revealed Himself to us, which Christians believe is the only way it *can* begin, then that can hardly be the case. God, having spoken the world into existence, and having spoken through it and in it since, would be in a position, were He so inclined, to one-up Descartes and proclaim, “*Dico; ergo sum*” (“I speak; therefore, I am”). Believers could say, “*Dixit; ergo est*” (“He has spoken; therefore, He is”). The Christian theologian therefore does not begin by asking whether God exists but by enquiring into what can be known about the One who has already taken the initiative and revealed Himself as existing.

The “whether” question inevitably comes up anyway though, for Christian philosophers especially, but for theologians too. It does so because we need to be clear about the grounds of our faith, for our own sake and for the sake of those who have not yet had the experience of being addressed by the revelation of God in Christ that we believe is objectively out there in nature, history, and Scripture. As an apologist, Lewis had to deal with the “whether” question a

lot, and gave in *Surprised by Joy* a detailed account of the experiences and reasonings that moved him over time from unbelief to belief. One might get the impression that the existence of God—as opposed to Lewis’s belief in that existence—depended on those experiences and reasonings, rather than their depending, like everything else, on His existence. That would be a false impression.

Lewis understood that the answers to whether God exists depend on His prior reality, rather than the other way around. He shows this in his poem “The Apologist’s Evening Prayer,” where his “cleverness shot forth” on God’s behalf and his proofs of Christ’s divinity are portrayed as tokens, coins whose “thin-worn image of Thy head” should not be confused with the Reality they represent (*Poems* 129). He shows it in the essay “On Obstinacy in Belief,” where the believer’s relationship with God has an existence logically prior to and independent of the reasons he consciously holds for believing in it. Those reasons are important and have a significant role to play, but God does not depend on them. The *whether* of God’s existence, in other words, comes after and depends upon the *what* and the *how*.

The Ontological Argument

This relationship becomes clear in what may be the most misunderstood of all the classical arguments for God’s existence, Anselm’s ontological argument. Anselm began by defining God as that Being greater than which none can be conceived. He then argued that such a Being would have to exist necessarily, because any being we could conceive as not existing would be less than the greatest Being that can be conceived.

A superficial understanding of Anselm has led many to reject his argument as invalid. Just because we can imagine something, however great, does not mean that it exists. Being the greatest thing I happen to be able to imagine is not evidence of existence. (I can imagine a

mountain taller than Everest, but that does not mean there is one on earth.) And existence is not an attribute that can be added or subtracted so that a being is “greater” with it than without it. Thus, the ontological argument has a certain circular feel to it. These objections are sound as far as they go; but I think (and it appears that Lewis thought) that they miss the point.

I would argue that Anselm’s ontological argument is best used not so much as an argument about *whether* God exists as a meditation on *how* He exists. (Anselm’s disciple and biographer Eadmer seems to have thought so too; see pages 29-30 of *The Life*.) God is not just some random contingent entity like you or me who just happens to exist, or who could exist or not. He is not just *a* being; He is the ground of *all* being. In other words, once you understand what God is, you must see that He *has* to exist. I exist (I assure you), but I don’t have to; I could as easily not exist. If I ceased to do so, outside of a very small handful of friends and readers (I fondly hope), the universe would not even notice and would be pretty much unaffected. If, on the other hand, God did not exist, nothing else would exist either.

The point is that as long as you are thinking of God as some random being, a bigger version of you or me, who just happens to exist, or who might exist or might not, i.e., whose existence is open to question, you are not yet thinking of *God*. To truly understand who He is, is to see that He exists *necessarily*, unlike you and me. This of course entails that He exists in fact. But Anselm did not start with the open question of whether God exists in fact or not and come up with a clever way of answering, “Yes.” His point was that this is precisely what we cannot do. To understand who God is, is to see that the question never was open in that way; it is to see that either we start with Him, or we cannot finish with anything.

The practical application of this reasoning to “*whether*” apologetics is the realization that we do not say that God exists because He is the biggest thing we can imagine. He is in fact

greater than anything we can imagine. (After all, Anselm did not define God as the greatest being *we* could conceive, but as the greatest that can *be* conceived.) All our imagined gods—like Zeus—are bigger versions of us who could exist or not. And I have noticed that these are the gods that atheists typically argue against. I am often tempted to say to them, “Congratulations! You have just refuted the existence of Zeus. Thank you for helping us dispose of that lame possibility. Now, let’s get back to the topic of *God*.” All our imagined gods—like Zeus, and the infamous Flying Spaghetti Monster—are bigger versions of us who could exist or not. Yet we have a concept of a God who is bigger even than that. Where did we get it?

The God of the Bible not the kind of thing we would have made up. When we project ourselves onto the cosmos imaginatively, we get gods who are personal but finite, like Zeus or Odin. When we project our abstract reason onto the cosmos, we get gods that are transcendent but impersonal, like Atman or The Force. Such are the gods—the idols—that we build up from below. But what if God’s personal Reality were so strong that it could impinge on our consciousness from above? In a discussion of the ontological argument, Lewis wrote to his brother Warnie on 24 October 1931, “It is arguable that the ‘idea of God’ in some minds does contain not a mere abstract definition, but a real imaginative perception of goodness and beauty, *beyond their own resources*” (*Letters* 2:7, emphasis added). They are justified in believing in God, not because they imagined Him (on their own), but because they could not have. That is why the very concept of His nature, once clearly seen, carries its own conviction of His reality.

Perhaps the reason the ontological argument seems so problematic is that it is convincing only to people who have already *seen* this—people who have been granted at least a faint apprehension of the Glory of God. Perhaps then its best use is not in trying to convince people abstractly of this reality before they have seen it, but rather in helping them to see it, to see why

they need to try to grasp for the first time the concept of *aseity*. (The word means that God exists *a se*, that is, “from Himself” or “on His own.” He is not like us. We exist *ab alio*, “from another.”) The Ontological Argument might be able to do this more effectively if the emphasis in its presentation were shifted from the *whether* of God’s existence to the *how*. I think C. S. Lewis shows us one way in which this might be done.

Lewis and the Ontological Argument

Lewis used the ontological argument apologetically only once in his public writings, and it was in a rather surprising place. This most sophisticated of philosophical arguments shows up in a presentation to the least sophisticated audience: the children for whom the Narnia books were written. It is the debate between Puddleglum and the Green Witch in *The Silver Chair*.

Describing the scene where Puddleglum stomps out the Witch’s mesmerizing fire, Lewis wrote to Nancy Warner on 26 October 1963 that “I have simply put the ‘Ontological Proof’ in a form suitable for children” (*Letters* 3:1472). How is this passage a version of the ontological proof?

To answer that question, we will have to take a careful look at Puddleglum’s speech. The Witch has been arguing that Overworld and Aslan are only a projection of the children’s imaginations. They have seen a lamp and imagined the sun; they have seen a cat and imagined Aslan. The marshwiggles reply:

Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that’s a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We’re just babies making up a game, if you’re right. But four babies making up a game can make play-world that licks your real world hollow. (TSC 190-91)

How is this passage a version of the ontological argument? The Witch’s reductionism could be taken as a rebuttal aimed in effect at the superficial version of the argument: just because you have imagined Aslan does not mean that he exists. Where did the idea of Aslan

come from? You just made it up, based on a projection from cats you have seen. Puddleglum's reply calls into question the plausibility of this explanation in a way that transfers the ground to what I have called the deeper ("how") version of the argument. The idea of Aslan, he argues in effect, could not have arisen in that way. It is highly unlikely that four children playing a game could have made up a world with a deeper rootedness in reality than the only real and solid world they had ever experienced. The final answer to a refutation of the superficial version of the ontological argument is to remember the experience on which the deeper version is based.

In other words, we have to get past the Witch's reductionistic, empiricist epistemology (explanation of knowing) to an ontology (explanation of being) capable of giving us something to know in the first place. How can Aslan be based on the existence of cats when cats cannot even account for their own existence? Is Aslan derived from cats, or are cats derived from Aslan? Something has to be capable of giving reality to everything else, and in Narnia that is not cats. It is Aslan or nothing. And because Narnia is something, nothing as the source of its reality is not really a viable alternative.

This is a version of the ontological argument "suitable for children." Therefore, Eustace and Jill will not be basing their faith in Aslan on the rather dense unpacking of the logic of Puddleglum's argument that I have just attempted, but on an intuition of its rightness that comes from something even more basic: the fact that Aslan exists so strongly that His revelatory Reality is able to impinge on their consciousness with self-attesting power.

Aslan is of course a picture of Yahweh, whose name means basically, "I just am." The children have known Him, and because they have truly known Him they know that to do so is to realize the inadequacy of even saying that they have known Him. "Well, he knows me" (VDT 117) is a more accurate representation of the situation: it speaks of Aslan's ontological priority to

everything, which is felt and shown in (and known by) the epistemological priority expressed in Edmund's reply. If you are thinking of Aslan as just a bigger cat, however much bigger you please, you are not yet thinking of *Aslan*. If you are thinking of Aslan as a cat of any kind whose existence is open to question, you are not yet thinking of *Aslan*.

The children, who have actually met Aslan, know this instinctively, and Puddleglum's speech reminds them of what they know. Their minds "contain not a mere abstract definition, but a real imaginative perception of goodness and beauty, *beyond their own resources*." They know Aslan not as a hypothesis or fancy they made up, but as something greater than that, something they could not have made up, something so great that it could not exist just in their minds. They know Him as the God Anselm knew, as the One who exists *necessarily*.

Conclusion

Thus the ontological argument, even if it be ambiguous as a deductive proof, can serve to bring to a level of insightful articulation the inklings of God's uncreated glory intuited from the majesty-in-contingency of Nature or granted in personal revelation.

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