Syllogism Nº 1

A   B   C
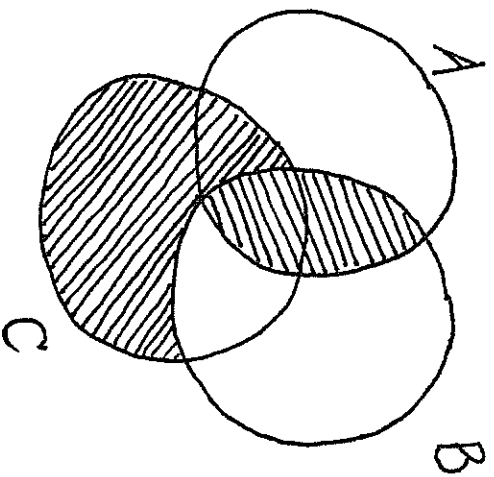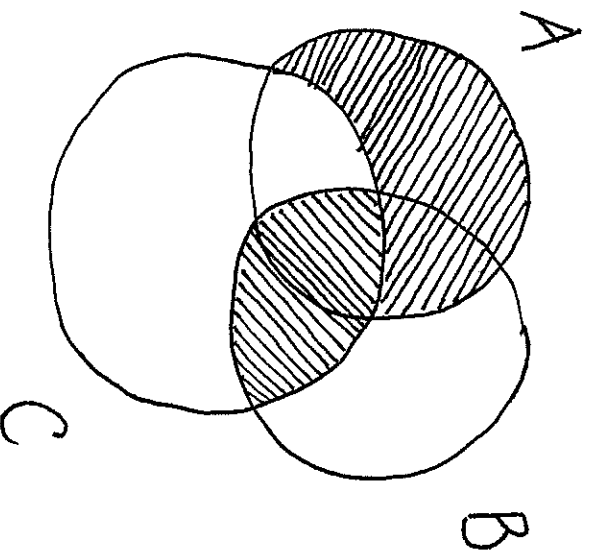
Syllogism Nº 2

A   B   C

John Hick:
Arguments for the Existence of God.
1970

// Begin

(b) The argument in Anselm

Anselm's own discussion is concerned with ontological or factual necessity. He states his argument in slightly different ways in two successive paragraphs of 'Reply', 1. The first is as follows:

If this [i.e. 'that than which a greater cannot be conceived'] can at least be conceived to be, it necessarily follows that it exists. For 'that than which a greater cannot be conceived' cannot be conceived to be, except as without a beginning. However, whatever can be conceived to be and actually is not can be conceived to be through a beginning. Therefore, it is not the case that 'that than which a greater cannot be conceived' can be conceived to

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exist and yet does not exist. Therefore, if it can be conceived to be, it necessarily is. (McGill, p. 22.)

In examining this argument let us first identify the three concepts involved in it. They are:

A. The (one-member) class of that than which a greater cannot be conceived.

B. The class of things which can be conceived to be through a beginning.

C. The class of things which can be conceived to be and actually are not (i.e. which do not exist, but could possibly exist).

Anselm's argument, stated in a valid form, is:

Every A is a non-B
Every C is a B
∴ Every A is a non-C

$= \text{No A is C}$

The proper conclusion of the argument is thus that 'that than which a greater cannot be conceived' does not fall in the class of things which do not exist but could possibly exist. In other words, it is not the case that (a) the idea of God is the idea of a non-eternal or contingent being, and that (b) God, so defined, does not exist. It is not however hereby proved that he is a non-contingent being who does exist (or for that matter, though Anselm was not interested in proving this, that he is a contingent being who does exist). In short, it is not proved that God exists.

It may be useful to set forth this same argument of Anselm's again in a slightly different form, which I have used elsewhere: (5)

(i) To be unsurpassably perfect is to be incapable-of-having-a-beginning;

(ii) to be non-existent-but-capable-of-existing is not to be incapable-of-having-a-beginning; and

(iii) therefore to be unsurpassably perfect is not to be non-existent-but-capable-of-existing.

What this argument proves is that God is not non-existent-but-capable-of-existing, that is, that he is not

contingently non-existent. But it does not prove that he exists.

Anselm's second formulation is as follows:

Further, if it can be conceived in any way at all, it is necessarily the case that it exists. For while someone may deny or doubt the existence of something than which a greater cannot be conceived, he will not deny or doubt that, if it does exist, then in fact and for the understanding it is impossible for it not to be. Otherwise, it would not be that than which a greater cannot be conceived. As for things which can be conceived and yet do not exist, even if such things were to exist, in fact and for the understanding it is possible for them not to be. Therefore, if 'that than which a greater cannot be conceived' can be conceived at all, it cannot not be. (McGill, pp. 25-6.)

Here the three concepts involved are:

A. The (one-member) class of that than which a greater cannot be conceived.

B. The class of things which can be conceived and yet do not exist (i.e. which do not exist, but could possibly exist).

C. The class of things such that it is impossible for them not to be.

Once again Anselm's own conclusion is a *non sequitur*, and the valid argument from his premises is as follows:

All A's are C's
All B's are non-C's
∴ All A's are non-B's

$= \text{No B is C}$
$= \text{No A is B}$

The conclusion is that 'that than which a greater cannot be conceived' does not fall in the class of things which do not exist but could possibly exist. That is to say, divine existence is not a contingent possibility which happens not to be realised. But in proving that 'that than which a greater cannot be conceived' is not a contingent which does not exist, it is not proved that it is a non-contingent which does exist.

To set out the valid part of Anselm's argument in another way: (6)

(i) Every non-existent-which-might-exist is a contingent;

(ii) no unsurpassably-perfect is a contingent;

(iii) therefore no unsurpassably-perfect is a non-existent-which-might-exist; and

(iv) therefore every unsurpassably-perfect is other than a non-existent-which-might-exist (i.e. is other than contingently non-existent).

Once again, what is proved is that God is not a contingent being, or more precisely that he does not contingently not-exist. In being other than a non-existent-which-might-exist he *either* exists *or* is a non-existent which could not exist (i.e. whose existence is impossible). But what is not proved is that he exists.

Having now examined, in the previous chapter, Anselm's 'Proslogion' 2 argument, and in this chapter his 'Proslogion' 3 and 'Reply' argument, we may next ask what the relation was in Anselm's own thinking between these two pieces of reasoning. And we may begin by noting that the distinction between them has been accentuated by the now traditional division of the 'Proslogion' into separate chapters, each with its own title — Chapter 2, 'That God Truly Is', and Chapter 3, 'That It Is Impossible to Conceive That God Is Not'. The original text formed a single continuous piece of prose with, for ease of reference, paragraph numbers in the margin and identificatory phrases attached to these numbers in a table of contents at the beginning. As A. C. McGill points out, 'It was not Anselm but his later editors who inserted the chapter titles into the text and so broke up its continuity into what look like self-contained and definitively entitled units. . . . For that reason, there are no grounds for *presuming* that Chapter II is a self-contained unit.' (7) Hence the question of the relation between the two forms or phases of Anselm's argument must be answered by reference to the internal logic of his reasoning rather than the external divisions of the text.

It appears to me that Karl Barth's view of the matter is essentially correct. (8) That is to say, Anselm is offering a single argument which divides into two phases. In the first phase he seeks to prove that God exists in the sense in which other things exist — that God is one of the items in a

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complete inventory of the universe. This is what Barth calls God's 'general' existence. But Anselm's overall concern in the 'Proslogion' is not simply to establish God's existence, but to establish in a single *argumentum* both his existence and his unique nature. And so in the second phase he seeks to show that the reasoning which proves God's existence also, at a deeper level, proves his unique nature as self-existent reality, as that which not merely exists but has necessary or ultimate existence. This is what Barth calls God's 'special' existence.

However the discussion of Anselm's intention is necessarily conjectural, and the philosophical consideration of the argument or arguments attributed to him does not depend upon the answer to such historical questions. Whatever Anselm's intention, it is still legitimate to emphasise the differences between the two phases of his reasoning and to argue, as Norman Malcolm and Charles Hartshorne have recently done, that whereas the argument in 'Proslogion' 2 is vulnerable to the Kantian criticism, that in 'Proslogion' 3 and the 'Reply' to Gaunilo is not.

(c) Norman Malcolm

In his important article 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments' (9) Norman Malcolm delineates with great clarity Anselm's concept of God's necessary being as eternal and independent existence. (10) He then quotes the first of the two paragraphs of Anselm's which I have discussed above (pp. 87-89), and comments:

What Anselm has proved is that the notion of contingent existence or of contingent non-existence cannot have any application to God. His existence must either be logically necessary or logically impossible. The only intelligible way of rejecting Anselm's claim that God's existence is necessary is to maintain that the concept of God, as a being a greater than which cannot be conceived, is self-contradictory or nonsensical. Supposing that this is false, Anselm is right to deduce God's necessary existence from his characterisation of Him as a being greater than which cannot be conceived. (11)

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END