

WAITING FOR GODO... AND GODAN: COMPLETING ROWE'S CRITIQUE OF THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

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Abstract. In his critique of Anselm's ontological argument for God's existence, William Rowe introduces the concepts of "magico" and "magican" — defining "magicos" as magicians that do not exist, and "magicans" as magicians that do exist — to help diagnose what may have gone wrong in Anselm's argument. As I made my way through Rowe's intriguing article, I found myself waiting for "Godo" — and for "Godan." I expected Rowe to invoke these counterparts to his "magico" and "magican" — a non-existing God to correspond to his non-existing magician, and an existing God to correspond to his existing magician — to complete his argument. Alas, like Vladimir and Estragon, I waited in vain: neither Godo — nor Godan — ever appeared. In what follows I shall argue that their inclusion in Rowe's argument would have settled the matter against Anselm far more decisively than do Rowe's forays into the murky waters of question-begging.

In his critique of Anselm's ontological argument for God's existence,¹ William Rowe introduces the concepts of "magico" and "magican" — defin-

1 "The Ontological Argument" first appeared in Joel Feinberg, ed., *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Encino, CA: Dickenson, 1973), 8-17. It was subsequently reprinted in condensed form as "The Ontological Argument and Question-Begging," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7 (1976), 425-32. It was also included as Chapter 3 in Rowe's *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (Independence, KY: Cengage, 2007; earlier editions: Wadsworth, 2001, 1993, and 1978). It was anthologized in at least two additional philosophy of religion readers: Louis Pojman and Lewis Vaughn, eds.

ing “magicos” as magicians that do not exist, and “magicans” as magicians that do exist — to help diagnose what may have gone wrong in Anselm’s argument. As I made my way through Rowe’s intriguing article, I found myself waiting for “Godo” — and for “Godan.” I expected Rowe to invoke these counterparts to his “magico” and “magican” — a non-existing God to correspond to his non-existing magician, and an existing God to correspond to his existing magician — to complete his argument. Alas, like Vladimir and Estragon, I waited in vain: neither Godo — nor Godan — ever appeared. To the best of my knowledge, despite the many debates spawned by Rowe’s contribution,² no one who engaged Rowe’s argument in the subsequent literature has wondered at the absence of these two; yet, as I shall argue in what follows, their inclusion in Rowe’s argument would have settled the matter against Anselm far more decisively than do Rowe’s forays into the murky waters of question-begging. I propose in this short paper to show how a strategy that makes use of Godos and Godans might strengthen Rowe’s analysis. In so doing I will inevitably also signal the more significant difficulties I discern in Rowe’s interpretation of the ontological argument.

I. WHAT DOES ANSELM'S ARGUMENT PROVE?

There is a gap between what Anselm wishes to prove and believes he has proved, on the one hand, and what he does in fact prove, on the other. It is

Philosophy: The Quest for Truth (New York: Oxford 2009); and Steven M. Cahn, ed. *Ten Essential Texts in the Philosophy of Religion: Classics and Contemporary Issues* (New York: Oxford, 2005).

² The debate with Stephen A. Davis follows Rowe’s publication in the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (1976): Davis, “Does the Ontological Argument Beg the Question?” 433-42; Rowe, “Comments on Professor Davis’ ‘Does the Ontological Argument Beg the Question?’” 443-47; Davis, “Anselm and Question-Begging: A Reply to William Rowe,” 448-57. This debate spurred Douglas Walton’s contribution, “The Circle in the Ontological Argument,” in the same journal, 9 (1978), 193-218. William Wainwright weighs in there as well: “The Ontological Argument, Question-Begging, and Professor Rowe” 9 (1978), 254-57. Peter J. Loftson challenges Rowe in his “Anselm, Meinong, and the Ontological Argument,” 11 (1980), 185-94, to which Davis responds, defending Rowe: “Loftson on Anselm and Rowe,” 13 (1982), 219-24. Rowe also conducts an exchange with Georges Dicker in *Faith and Philosophy*. See Dicker, “A Refutation of Rowe’s Critique of Anselm’s Ontological Argument” 5 (1988), 193-202; Rowe, “Response to Dicker,” 203-205; Dicker, “A Note on Rowe’s ‘Response to Dicker,’” 206.

clear that what Anselm intends to prove and supposes he has proved is that there is a specific being, God, who does actually exist. Yet, although the argument's conclusion, "God exists in reality," does follow in one sense from the argument's premisses, it does not in that sense mean what Anselm intends and consequently falls far short of being the answer to his prayers. Anselm's *reductio ad absurdum* proof proceeds roughly as follows.³

- (1) God is understood to be something than which nothing greater can be conceived.⁴
- (2) Since whatever is understood exists in the understanding, a being than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the understanding.
- (3) Whatever exists in the understanding may exist either (a) in the understanding alone or (b) both in the understanding and in reality.
- (4) A thing that exists not only in the understanding but also in reality is greater than a thing that exists in the understanding alone.
- (5) Suppose: That than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the understanding alone.
- (6) If so, something yet greater can be conceived — namely, something that does not exist in the understanding alone but also in reality.
- (7) But then, that than which nothing greater can be conceived is not that than which nothing greater can be conceived.
- (8) So, what is supposed in (5) — namely, that that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the understanding alone — is false.

3 There have been numerous formulations of this argument. The reconstruction I propose reflects my understanding of it.

4 *aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*. Rowe seeks to rid Anselm's argument of this locution. See the longer version of Rowe's article, in Feinberg (1973), 10. Loftson (1980), 185, challenges Rowe's substitution of "the being than which none greater is possible" for "the being than which none greater is conceivable."

(9) So, that than which nothing greater can be conceived does not exist in the understanding alone.

(10) So, that than which nothing greater can be conceived — namely, God — exists in reality.

Has Anselm succeeded in proving that God exists in reality? Yes — and no. If we grant the controversial premiss (4) and allow that something that exists in reality is greater than something that does not,⁵ there is both a way in which the argument works and one in which it fails. In order to see what the argument does prove and what it fails to prove, we will have recourse to the counterparts of Rowe's *magico* and *magician*: *Godo* and *Godan*.

Let us take Anselm's God to correspond to Rowe's *magician*; *Godo* to correspond to Rowe's *magico*; *Godan* to correspond to Rowe's *magician*. According to Rowe, *magicians* can be either *magicos* or *magicans*, that is, they can be either fictive (which Rowe calls non-existing) *magicians* or real (existing) ones. Rowe offers Merlin as an example of a *magico*, and Houdini as an instance of a *magician*. One might say of a *magico*, then, that it exists in the understanding alone,⁶ and of a *magician* that it exists not only in the understanding but also in reality.⁷ Both, however, qualify as *magicians*.

5 As has been frequently pointed out (see, for example, Douglas Walton [1978], 198), Anselm cannot have meant that any existent thing is superior to any nonexistent thing. It has been suggested that he must have meant that an existent version of the same thing is greater than a nonexistent one (Walton, 199). My concern here is that surely this would not be true of a bad thing: would not a bad thing be better if it did not exist than if it did? My own view, founded on this and other concerns, is that even a good thing is not greater if it exists than not but that it is better for us *that* it exists. As Norman Malcolm puts it in "Anselm's Ontological Arguments," *Philosophical Review* 69 (1960), 41-62: "One might say, with some intelligibility, that it would be better (for oneself or for mankind) if God exists than if He does not — but that is a different matter" (43). It is for this reason that a bad thing is not greater if it exists than not: it would not, after all, be better for us if it exists.

6 Dicker (1988), 197, finds fault with Rowe's substitution of "some nonexistent thing is God" for "God exists only in the understanding." Rowe concedes (1988), 203, that the substitution produces a slightly different, though similar, argument, which he calls "Son of Anselm's argument," but the new argument, he contends, does not rely on the claim that God exists in the understanding, and yields a valid argument once the premiss, "If X is a possible thing, then X is either an existing thing or a nonexistent thing," is added. This is a premiss that I will challenge in what follows.

7 Rowe will argue in a subsequent paper that *magicans* cannot exist in the understanding alone. See Rowe (1988), 205. I discuss that idea briefly below. See n. 18.

Transferring Rowe's distinction among magicians, *magicos*, and *magicians* to the ontological argument, what emerges as the gist and upshot of Anselm's argument is that God cannot be a *Godo* and so must be a *Godan*, and the conclusion of his argument is actually (10'): God is a *Godan*. One significant disagreement I have, then, with Rowe is that in offering his critique of the ontological argument⁸ he proposes, on behalf of an anonymous "someone," an alternative to Anselm's ontological argument in which (10') is not Anselm's conclusion but his first premiss, that is, it is the stipulative definition, "God is an existing, wholly (or supremely⁹) perfect being," that launches the argument.¹⁰ The next premiss of this argument is: "Since it can't be true that an existing, wholly perfect being does not exist, it can't be true that God, as I've defined Him, does not exist." And its conclusion is: "God must exist."¹¹ For this dubious construction of the ontological argument Rowe is duly taken to task by Stephen Davis in subsequent debates.¹² Davis argues, in my view convincingly, that God's status as an existing thing cannot be the starting point of the ontological argument. Davis refers to the argument that takes this proposition as Anselm's first premiss as the SOA (the simple ontological argument), and contrasts it with the ordinary version of the argument which he calls the OA (the ontological argument).¹³ For present purposes, what is important to appreciate is that (10') is actually the OA's conclusion.

Let us assert, then, that "God is an existing, wholly (supremely) perfect being," or, in our new terminology, "God is a *Godan*," is indeed Anselm's conclusion, the conclusion of the OA. How close is (10') to Anselm's (10): "God [or, that than which nothing greater can be conceived] exists[both in the understanding and] in reality"? As Rowe very helpfully shows, although magicians are defined as existent magicians, there need not be any. Rowe rightly

8 In the article's longer version, Rowe first advances critiques proposed by Gaunilo, Kant, and C. D. Broad and discusses them, and in his final section (Section IV) proposes his own critique.

9 In his response to Davis (1976), 443-47, Rowe substitutes "supremely perfect" for "wholly perfect."

10 To anyone who might object to including existence in the definition of God, Rowe replies on behalf of the someone: "anyone can define a word in whatever way he pleases" (1976), 112.

11 Rowe (1976), 427.

12 Davis (1976), 433-42; 448-57.

13 Davis (1976), 433-42, contends that the SOA is question-begging but the OA is not.

sees that the type *magician* need not be instantiated. It so happens that it is instantiated by Houdini; but it might well not have been. I should like to argue that if indeed what Anselm proves is that God is a Godan, what he has shown is interesting and important; he has shown that there is something unique about the term God, namely, that it, unlike “*magician*,” can apply only to the existent (real) variety. Whereas *magicos* can be magicians as Rowe defines them, no Godo, *as it turns out*, can be God as Anselm defines him. So, the only thing that can instantiate or exemplify God, Anselm’s argument shows, is an individual thing that also instantiates or exemplifies Godan. Nevertheless, Anselm has certainly not succeeded in showing that there is or must be any actual thing that instantiates or exemplifies Godan, that it is not possible for the set of existent Gods — Godans — to be empty.¹⁴ Note that it is individuals that instantiate the category *magicians* by instantiating either of its two subcategories, *magicans* and *magicos*. So, too, in the case of the category God: only individuals can instantiate it. What the ontological argument shows, however, is that only an individual that instantiates the category Godan can instantiate the category God.

II. WHERE ANSELM GOES WRONG

In Anselm’s argument God starts out as undifferentiated with respect to the sub-categories existent (real) or not-existent (merely imagined). The term “God” applies to any thing than which none greater can be conceived,¹⁵ and its reach is broad enough — at first — to include both a real God and a God who is not real — one who is imagined or is, in Anselm’s words, “in the understanding alone.” In other words, at the argument’s inception, both Godans and Godos qualify as God. For “the fool” God is a Godo; he thinks that something than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the

14 As Jerome Shaffer notes, we have at our disposal the expression “exists” as well as “there is,” and sometimes the one we choose makes all the difference (though at other times not). In discussions of the ontological argument it is often helpful to keep the two distinct: to use the latter when we wish to say that there is something in the world to which the label in question applies. See Shaffer, “Existence, Predication, and the Ontological Argument,” *Mind*, n.s. 71 (1962), 307-25, 319-20.

15 Anselm begins with *aliquid*, something, someone, though he later speaks of “that than which,” to refer to that something or someone.

understanding alone. For Anselm, God is a Godan; he believes that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists both in the understanding and in reality. The purpose of Anselm's argument is to prove the fool wrong. If we allow Anselm's premiss (4), we see that his argument establishes God as a Godan. The problem is, however, that Anselm wishes to prove more than that God is a Godan. What he wishes to prove is that there is a certain *individual* named God (the counterpart of Houdini), who instantiates Godan. This is an entirely different matter. Anselm has confused (a) the original term God, which is broad enough to include real ones (Godans) and not-real ones (Godos), just as the term magician can include real ones (magicans) and not-real ones (magicos), with (b) God as an individual — the counterpart of Houdini or Merlin — who awaits the label Godo or Godan. It is not that Godos have vanished as a consequence of Anselm's argument; indeed, all God-candidates exposed as fraudulent or imaginary (nonexistent) versions of "the being than which nothing greater can be conceived" are Godos. What we now know as a result of Anselm's argument is that anything that meets the criterion of being a thing than which nothing greater can be conceived will have to be a Godan; were we to call such a thing a Godo we could, with sufficient careful thought, come to recognize that we had erred; we would see the logical impossibility of the nonexistence of a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. Nevertheless, the fact remains that we do not know if there is any such thing (a being than which nothing greater can be conceived) or what it would mean to encounter it.

To review. For Anselm, the term God initially applies, like terms such as magician or dog, to both real and fictive ones. Furthermore, the concept of a thing than which no greater can be conceived is coherent; everyone, believer or not, understands it. It is, moreover, what everyone means by God, and so it is "in" everyone's — even the fool's — understanding. God is then divided into two kinds: real and fictive, that is, (a) existing in the understanding *and* in reality, and (b) existing in the understanding alone. We called these kinds Godan and Godo, corresponding to Rowe's *magican* and *magico*. Anselm now argues that someone who is God can be a Godo only on pain of contradiction: if God were a Godo, then that than which no greater can be conceived would *not* be that than which no greater can be conceived. So, God must be a Godan: the term God, defined as that than which nothing greater

can be conceived, has been found to apply only to real, and not to fictive, gods. (In the corresponding case of magicians, if one could, counterfactually, eliminate the possibility that magicians might be fictive [i.e. *magicos*], one could conclude that magicians can only be real [i. e. *magicans*].)

What does it mean to say that Anselm has shown that God must be a Godan? It means that if there is something that genuinely qualifies as a thing than which no greater thing can be conceived, it cannot be merely imaginary; it cannot exist “in the understanding alone.” Anything than which nothing greater can be conceived would have to be real. But, whether there is any such being we simply do not know. Many past gods thought to be Godans have ultimately come to be regarded as Godos. And the few candidates who have survived to this day and who have many, perhaps billions of, supporters, do not really know if *their* God is a Godan because they do not really know if there is any such God as theirs.¹⁶

Presented with the ontological argument, many of us have wondered how it is that this empirical question can be resolved a priori when no other empirical question seems to be resolvable that way. What I hope to have exposed is Anselm’s equivocation on “God.” For even if Anselm has succeeded in making the case that no genuine God can, in the final analysis, be a Godo, and so, therefore, that any genuine God can only be a Godan, by the time he concludes that God exists in reality, God has become for him a proper name, the name of a particular God. Anselm has not shown, however, that this God, that *any* particular God, is in fact a Godan because he has not provided a way of testing — a posteriori — whether there is any particular God who qualifies as that than which nothing greater can be conceived.

III. POSSIBLE THINGS

Rowe will eventually locate the source of the failure of Anselm’s ontological argument in its question-begging, and will in turn trace its question-begging to an idea that is critical, in his view, to the ontological argument, namely, that God is a possible being. Although Rowe argues that a nonexistent being

16 As Robert McKim points out (*Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* [New York: Oxford, 2001]), God has done a fine job of keeping himself hidden.

cannot be a *magican* (a nonexistent being *can* be a magician), he recognizes, correctly in my view, that it does not therefore follow that there must be an existent being who *is* a magician. Rowe seems to think, moreover, at least at first, that this ought to settle the matter as far as God is concerned. For even if we stipulate for God the definition of existent perfect being, he reasons, this no more proves that there is a God than that stipulating for *magican* the definition of existent magician proves that there are *magicans*. So far, so good — for Rowe and for us. Yet, Rowe says, things are not so simple. The wrinkle he cannot easily smooth is Anselm's contention that God is a *possible* being, which, as Rowe understands this expression, means that some possible object is God. For if God is a possible being, then he must be either an existent or a nonexistent thing (there is no third option). And the proposition that God must be either an existent or a nonexistent thing, coupled with the proposition that no nonexistent being can be God, seems to yield the conclusion that some existent thing must be God.

In hopes of discrediting this conclusion, Rowe has recourse to the charge of question-begging, imputing to Anselm's notion of God as a possible being a hidden component (“the assertion that some existing being is supremely great”¹⁷) that amounts to more than the usual sense of “possible” as the attribute of being coherent and not self-contradictory. Rowe argues that *magican* is coherent and not self-contradictory, yet, when there are no existent (real) magicians, no possible object can be a *magican*; in other words, in the absence of existent (real) magicians “*magican*” becomes uninstantiable,¹⁸ since, unlike in the case of “*magician*,” no nonexistent things can instantiate a *magican*. (This result is hardly surprising: since a *magican* just *is* an existing magician, there is of course no *magican* when there is no existing magician. That is to say, there is no *magican* when there is no *magican*.) In the same way, Rowe argues, since no nonexistent thing can be God on the assumption that

17 Rowe (1976), 432.

18 This view strikes me as confused. Even if there are no real magicians, there can be *magicans* — that is, the category of *magican* remains. If there are no real magicians, there will not be any actual thing that qualifies as a *magican*, since a *magican* just is a real magician. So long as it is possible for there to be real magicians (and what but incoherence would prevent that), possible objects can still be *magicans*. This point is made by Dicker (1988), 197. For this reason, it would seem that, pace Rowe (1988), 205, *magicans* can indeed exist in the understanding alone, remaining instantiable but uninstantiated.

existence is a perfection, it follows that unless there is an existent supremely perfect being (the counterpart of existent magicians), and not only flawed beings — that is, unless there is an actual God — God is uninstantiable (or, in Rowe's terms, impossible): there is no possible being that is God.¹⁹ So, paradoxically, unless God actually exists, God is not a possible being since no possible object can be God. Hence the charge of question-begging: God may be a coherent concept, but since he is not possible unless he is actual, "possible" when used with respect to God assumes *ab initio* that he is actual.

In order to see if indeed Anselm is guilty of question-begging, we will try now to sort out the senses in which a thing may be said to be "possible." Rowe defines possible things as things that are coherent and not self-contradictory and so not impossible like a square circle. (He later understands a possible thing to be a thing some possible object might exemplify.²⁰) Rowe also says that, as possible, these things might or might not exist.²¹ He then constructs two columns to suggest the range of possible things, things that might or might not exist.²² The left-hand column contains things that do exist but might not have, the right, things that do not exist but might have.²³ The contents of his columns, however, are an odd mix: if dogs (which appear in the left-hand column) and unicorns (which appear in the right) are "possible things" they are surely not possible in the same way as the Empire State Building (left) and the Abominable Snowman (right) are. Dogs and unicorns, like magicians, each have two subcategories: existing ones and non-existing ones, to use Rowe's idiom. (In my preferred mode of expression, they are real ones and fictive, imagined, pretend, fraudulent, or otherwise "not-real" ones.) In a subsequent article²⁴ Rowe speaks of "unicornexes," existing unicorns (real

19 Rowe (1976, 432) puts the God-matter this way. If no non-existing thing can be God, yet all existing things are imperfect (flawed) and hence not God, then no possible object can be God and God is not a possible (but an impossible) thing.

20 Rowe (1976), 430-31.

21 As we shall see, Rowe will soon define a possible being as something that *must* either exist or not exist. See (1976), 430. (Rowe does also include necessary things among possible things, but for present purposes it is useful to treat possible things as non-necessary or contingent.)

22 These columns appear only in the article's longer version, Feinberg (1973), 8.

23 The left-hand column contains The Empire State Building, Dogs, The planet Mars; the right-hand column contains The Fountain of Youth, Unicorns, and The Abominable Snowman.

24 Rowe (1976), 445.

ones), as a kind of unicorn. I propose that we identify, on his behalf, a more euphonious pair of unicorn subcategories: unicans and unicos, unicans being existing unicorns (real ones) and unicos being non-existing (or fictive) ones. It is particular magicians, dogs, and unicorns that instantiate these subcategories. To take the case of dogs: any real ones — dogans — would be assigned, like Houdini among magicians, to the left-hand column; storybook ones — dogos — would be placed, like Merlin, in the right-hand column. Particular magicians, particular unicorns, and particular dogs, then, will fall into one of the two columns. Whenever an *individual* of any kind presents itself we can ask about *it* into which column it should go. These individuals are possible things: they are either real or not. But magicians, dogs, and unicorns, as well as magicans, magicos, dogans, dogos, unicans, and unicos, are the categories and subcategories into which individuals are sorted.

It would seem that there are at least two ways in which things may be possible. The first, the way in which magicians and dogs are possible, is by being instantiable both by individual real things and by individual not-real things. The second, the way in which such things as the Empire State Building and the Abominable Snowman are possible, is by instantiating either the subcategory containing things that are real or the subcategory containing things that are not-real, but not both, while they might have instantiated the other. The Empire State Building instantiates only the subcategory of real (existing) buildings; the Abominable Snowman only that of mythical figures (non-existing things); each *might* have been in the opposite subcategory.

What, then, is the status of (the subcategories) magicans and dogans and unicans, magicos and dogos and unicos? These, like magicians, dogs, and unicorns, belong *in* neither column since they are instantiated and do not instantiate.²⁵ It is the things that instantiate them that belong in either of the two columns. Individual magicans, dogans, and unicans belong in the left-hand column; individual magicos, dogos, and unicos, in the right. For any

25 Wainwright (1978), 256, argues that “existence *per se* . . . cannot be a defining feature of a *type* of thing (being, entity)” (emphasis in original), and so concludes that either concepts of existents are incoherent or the concept of God (as a type of being) is not a concept that can have existence as one of its features. I am allowing magican to be a coherent concept, but it is surely not in the same league as magicians and dogs. It picks out a “type” only in the sense that it is instantiable in principle.

particular magician who presents himself, we would have to decide if he is a magican (as Houdini is) or a magico (as Merlin is), and place him in the appropriate column, left or right. So, too, for any particular dog or unicorn.

Are magicans and dogans, magicos and dogos, possible beings? They are certainly not possible in either of the senses we have identified. Neither (a) are they instantiable the way magicians and dogs are, that is, by both real and fictive things: magicans and dogans are instantiable only by real things, and magicos and dogos only by fictive things; nor (b) do they instantiate (like Houdini and Merlin) either subcategory, since they constitute subcategories. Only individual things instantiate; subcategories are categories, not instances. The only sense in which magicans are possible things is, then, yet a third one, (c): they are instantiable in principle — since they are not incoherent or self-contradictory — though they may not be instantiated at all: although magicans are in principle instantiable, there need be no existent thing that is one.²⁶ (In the case of magicos, they too are in principle instantiable, though oddly, by nonexistent magicians. Of course, there may be no imaginary magician that one would call a magico.) Let us note that it is only things possible in sense (b) that *must* be existent or not: having to be existent or not (real or not-real) is a feature of the individual things that instantiate the categories or subcategories, not of the categories or subcategories themselves. Categories and subcategories *may* be instantiated or not.

IV. WHERE ROWE GOES WRONG

Besides his unfortunate introduction of and attention to the SOA, noted above, Rowe's analysis of the error in Anselm goes awry also, in part because of its failure to keep the various senses of "possible" from running into one another, in part because it conflates God and Godan.

One difficulty in Rowe's analysis may be attributed to his understanding "God is a possible object" as "Some possible object is God," because the sense of "possible" in these two propositions is not the same. We earlier identified three senses of "possible": (a) something (e.g. magician) is possible because it is instantiable by both existent (real) and nonexistent (not-real) individual

26 Rowe (1976), 428.

things; (b) something is possible (e.g. Houdini and Merlin) if it — an individual being — either exists or does not exist (but not both), but might have been in the opposite condition; and (c) something is possible if it is instantiable in principle — it is not incoherent or self-contradictory — though it may not be instantiated at all (e.g. magican). To understand by the proposition, “God is a possible being,” that God must either exist or not but not both, is to take the proposition in sense (b), which is appropriate only for individuals. We can say “Houdini is a possible magician (thing)” because Houdini either exists (is a real magician/thing) or does not exist (is a not-real magician/thing) but not both.²⁷ To understand the proposition, “God is a possible being,” as “Some possible object is God,” however, is to state that God is (must be) *instantiated* (Rowe prefers “exemplified”) either by an existent or by a nonexistent being but not by both. Here, God has become a category or a concept or a type, that is, something instantiated rather than something that instantiates. Indeed, in saying “Some possible object is God,” Rowe in effect introduces a fourth sense of “possible,” (d): something is possible if there *must* be either an existent thing or a nonexistent thing that instantiates it, but not both.²⁸

If we were to retain Rowe’s original expression “God is a possible being,” and take it in sense (b) — according to which God is an individual that either exists or does not exist but not both — the argument’s equivocation on God noted above in Section II (between God as a concept and God as a proper name) becomes quickly apparent. In sense (b), God is possible the way Houdini, Merlin, the Empire State Building, and the Fountain of Youth, are. As

27 When Rowe says that no non-existing thing can be a magican, it would perhaps have been more accurate for him to have said that no non-existing *magician* can be a magican. Perhaps he says “thing” so that when he deals with the case of God he can say that no non-existing thing can be God. But, as we have seen, it is perfectly appropriate to say that no non-existing God (no Godo) can be God. It is precisely this that Anselm argues in his OA.

28 We can see that Rowe thinks of God both as an individual thing and as a category or type that is instantiated. Compare: “But if something is a possible thing then it is either an existing thing or a non-existing thing. The set of possible things can be exhaustively divided into those possible things which actually exist and those possible things which do not exist” (1976, 430), with “the only thing that could logically exemplify his concept of God is something which actually exists” or his parsing of “God is a possible thing” as “some possible object exemplifies his concept of God” (1976), 431. The things that either exist or not are the Houdinis and Merlins; the things that are “exemplified” by Houdinis and Merlins are magicians, magicans, and magicos.

in the case of these individuals, it would have to be determined with respect to an individual, God, if he is either existent or nonexistent, a real or a make-believe one. If it is assumed that this God is the supremely perfect being, the game is over before it begins. The defective argument would look something like this (Argument A):

- (1) God is a supremely perfect being.
- (2) God is a possible being.
- (3) A possible being is either real (existent) or not-real (nonexistent); it may not be both.
- (4) A supremely perfect being cannot be a nonexistent (not-real) thing.
- (5) God cannot be a nonexistent (not-real) thing.
- (6) So, God is an existent thing.

It should be clear that this version of the argument (Argument A) is shot through with equivocation. The God of premiss (1) is a category, concept, or type, whereas the God of premiss (2) is an individual named God. Again, the supremely great being of premiss (4) is a category, concept, or type, but the God of premiss (5) is an individual who may or may not qualify as a supremely great being. What we do not know is whether or not the individual named God in fact satisfies the criteria for the supremely perfect being.

If we go the other route and understand, with Rowe, "God is a possible being," as "Some possible object is God," the argument would proceed as follows (Argument B):

- (1) God is the supremely perfect being.
- (2) Some possible object is God.
- (3) 'God' must be instantiated either by an existent thing or by a non-existent thing but not both (taking "possible" in sense [d]).

- (4) No nonexistent thing instantiates God.
- (5) Suppose: No existent thing instantiates God.
- (6) Then God is not a possible being.
- (7) So, what is supposed in (5) is false.
- (8) So, an existent thing instantiates God.

This version of the argument (Argument B) employs in premiss (3) the confused sense (d) of “possible.” Hence premiss (3) is the offending premiss in this argument. When God is an instantiable rather than an individual instantiator, there are only two senses, (a) and (c), in which he might be possible. As an instantiable, God can only be either like magician or dog, or like magican or dogan. If, on the one hand, God is like magician or dog, he will be possible in sense (a), that is, he will be instantiable by both existents and nonexistents. Just as one would surely not say of possible magicians or dogs that they *must be* instantiated either by existents or by nonexistents but *not* by both, so one ought not say this about the possible being, God. If, on the other hand, God is like a magican or dogan, he will be possible in sense (c): he will be in principle instantiable but may not be instantiated. The argument would then go as follows (Argument C):

- (1) God is an existing supremely perfect being (a Godan).
- (2) Godans are possible beings (in sense [c]).
- (3) Things that are possible (in sense [c]) are instantiable in principle but need not be instantiated.
- (4) God is instantiable in principle but need not be instantiated.
- (5) So, there need not be a God.

By understanding “God is possible” as “Some possible object is God” (premiss [2] of Argument B), and by taking “Some possible object is God” to mean, in sense (d), that “God” must be instantiated either by an existent

thing or by a nonexistent thing but not both (premiss [3] of Argument B), Rowe abandons the perfectly reasonable sense, sense (c), that applies to “God is possible.”

We are now in a position to appreciate the third and most serious difficulty in Rowe’s analysis of the ontological argument: his confusion of God with Godan. It is true, let us suppose, of Godans, as it is of magicans, that no nonexistent objects can be them, or, more plausibly, that no merely fictive or imagined objects can instantiate them. If it should happen also to be the case that no existing thing can instantiate them, then, at least in Rowe’s new, and faulty, sense (d), they are not possible. But, let us note, it is not of Godan that Anselm predicates “possible.” When Anselm says that God is a possible being (what he says, of course, is that God might exist in the understanding alone or both in the understanding and in reality), since the God he is speaking of is the God who is “something than which nothing greater can be conceived” and not yet Godan (an existing one), Anselm would not — and could not — endorse at the start of his argument the proposition that no non-existent (imaginary) thing can be God. On the contrary, since God is the counterpart of magician, non-existent objects (things that exist in the understanding alone) can be God just as non-existent objects can be magicians. Imaginary beings (magicos) can be magicians; a not-real God (Godo) can be God. So, since God is a possible being (in sense [(a)], then even if no nonexistent thing can be a Godan, that would not mean — at least until God is shown to be a Godan — that no nonexistent thing can be God.

Anselm, to be sure, does go on to prove, as we have seen, that God is a Godan, but it is not of Godan that Anselm predicates “possible.” Moreover, as we (and Rowe) have said, to be a Godan is to be instantiable — it must be possible in principle for something to instantiate it — but it need not be actually instantiated. It is in this sense, (c), if any, that Godans are possible: there might be a Godan, but only if there is a Godan. Although it is true, of course, that no nonexistent thing can be a Godan, no existent thing need be a Godan — as we have seen in the case of magicans, dogans, and unicans. What Anselm’s argument fails to establish is that there is any actual instantiation of Godan.

Consider, then, this fourth version of the ontological argument (Argument D):

- (1) God is a possible (supremely perfect) being.
- (2) A possible being may be instantiated by both existent and non-existent things.
- (3) God may be instantiated by both existent (supremely perfect) things (Godans) and nonexistent (supremely perfect) things (Godos).
- (4) No Godo can be God (on Anselm's assumptions [i] that it is greater to exist than not to exist, and [ii] that God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived).
- (5) God is a Godan.
- (6) No nonexistent things can instantiate Godan.
- (7) Only existent things can instantiate Godan.
- (8) So, only existent things can instantiate God.

That only existent things can instantiate God is indeed, as I have argued, what Anselm's ontological argument successfully shows. What it does not show is that there must be any such existent thing. If there need not be any existent thing that instantiates Godan, then there need not be any existent thing that instantiates God; and, if there need not be any existent thing that instantiates God, there need not be a God.

V. ANSELM'S SECOND ARGUMENT

Although Rowe does not deal with Anselm's argument in *Proslogion* 3, an analysis of that argument might help further elucidate the flaw in *Proslogion* 2's argument. In *Proslogion* 3 Anselm argues not simply that if God is to be something than which nothing greater can be conceived it must exist (i.e. must be a Godan), but that it must exist necessarily, or, in Anselm's words, must be something that cannot be thought not to exist. I will call something

that cannot be thought not to exist a *necessarily* existent God_n or a God_n. Here, too, the problem is not that Anselm has not proved God to be a God_n — he has. His error is in his thinking that he has proved a specific God, the God in whose existence he believes, to be God, that is, to be that than which nothing greater can be conceived, and hence to be a God_n. Thus the problem is not that Anselm begs the question, for he does not begin with the assumption that God exists or exists necessarily; God remains a possible being until he is proved to be a necessarily existent being, a God_n. In fact, in order for this argument to proceed, as is the case with the argument in *Proslogion* 2, “God” has to start out being broad enough to embrace non-existing objects no less than existing ones, so that, at first, it is not the case that no non-existing thing can be God. Yet, once Anselm establishes that God is indeed a God_n, and hence, in the final analysis, that no nonexistent thing can be God, he still needs to prove that there *is* a particular God who qualifies as a being than which nothing greater can be conceived, there is no basis for concluding that there is a God who is also a God_n. Since the assertion that a necessarily existent being does not exist is indeed self-contradictory, anything that is a necessarily existent being will exist. In other words, any particular God who satisfies Anselm’s definition of God would indeed — and necessarily — be a God_n. Whether there is any God who satisfies Anselm’s definition of God is the question that remains unresolved. And it is not a matter that is resolvable a priori.

VI. MALCOLM AND SHAFFER

In the early 1960’s two philosophers debated the question of how God’s necessary existence affects his actual existence. Malcolm argued that since God is a necessary existent he indeed must exist: only if the concept “God” is incoherent would God not exist, and necessarily so. Malcolm argues as follows.

If He does exist He cannot have come into existence . . . nor can He cease to exist. . . . So if God exists His existence is necessary. 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.²⁹

29 Malcolm (1960), 49-50.

Jerome Shaffer offered in response the very point I have been making in this paper, namely, that although it is self-contradictory to say that a necessary being does not exist, it is not self-contradictory to say that there is no actual thing that answers to the concept necessary existent. And, so long as we have not identified — a posteriori — such a being, there need be no necessary existent and hence there need be no God. In Shaffer's words:

To establish that the concept of God has extension requires adducing some additional argument to show that over and above its intensional features, over and above the content of the concept (or the meaning of the word, "God"), the concept of God has extension as well. This additional argument will of necessity have to be an a posteriori argument to the effect that certain evidences make it reasonable to think that some actual existent answers to the concept.³⁰

One thing that is of interest in this debate is that it reprises the ancient 11th Century debate between Anselm and Gaunilo.³¹ Gaunilo concludes Chapter 5 of his "In Behalf of the Fool" as follows: "For it should be proved first that this being itself really exists somewhere; and then, from the fact that it is greater than all, we shall not hesitate to infer that it also subsists in itself."³² In other words, Gaunilo is happy to grant that God is a necessary being ("subsists in itself"); indeed he is willing to grant even that God's necessity (self-subsistence) follows from His being greater than all. But what he will not concede without proof — that is, without, presumably, an a posteriori proof (he clearly finds specious the purely a priori proof that Anselm has provided) — is that the world contains such a being. Prove to me that there is such a being, Gaunilo says, and I will grant you your being whose existence is necessary.

30 Shaffer (1962), 325.

31 Malcolm (1960), 48-49, indeed quotes Anselm's *Response to Gaunilo*. He cites Response 1 which is certainly relevant, although I believe that Response 3, which I quote, may be more directly pertinent. Shaffer does not refer to the exchange between Anselm and Gaunilo.

32 St. Anselm: *Proslogium; Monologium: An Appendix In Behalf Of The Fool By Gaunilo; And Cur Deus Homo*, trans. Sidney Norton Deane (with an Introduction, Bibliography, and Reprints of the Opinions of Leading Philosophers and Writers on the Ontological Argument) Chicago: Open Court, 1903; rpt. 1926.

For Anselm, however, as for Malcolm after him, it is not possible for something whose existence is necessary not to exist. Here is what Anselm says at the end of his Response 3 to Gaunilo:

Hence, if any one says that he conceives this being [a being than which a greater is inconceivable] not to exist, I say that at the time when he conceives of this either he conceives of a being than which a greater is inconceivable, or he does not conceive at all. If he does not conceive, he does not conceive of the non-existence of that of which he does not conceive. But if he does conceive, he certainly conceives of a being which cannot be even conceived not to exist. For if it could be conceived not to exist, it could be conceived to have a beginning and an end. But this is impossible. He, then, who conceives of this being conceives of a being which cannot be even conceived not to exist; but he who conceives of this being does not conceive that it does not exist; else he conceives what is inconceivable. The non-existence, then, of that than which a greater cannot be conceived is inconceivable.³³

What Anselm is saying, in effect, is that if someone conceives of a being that cannot be conceived not to exist, he cannot also conceive of that being as not-existing. For, if someone could conceive of such a being as not-existing, he would have to conceive of it as having, per impossibile, a beginning and an end, things that a being whose non-existence is inconceivable cannot possibly have. It follows that anyone who conceives of a being whose nonexistence is inconceivable cannot conceive that it does not exist, since to do so is to conceive what is inconceivable.

I suggest the following as an alternate way of understanding Anselm's argument:

- (1) Suppose: The being whose nonexistence is inconceivable does not exist.
- (2) Then the nonexistence of the being whose nonexistence is inconceivable *is conceivable*.
- (3) But, (2) is absurd.
- (4) So what is supposed in (1) is false.

33 "Response to Gaunilo," (1903; rpt. 1926).

(5) So, the being whose nonexistence is inconceivable — does exist.

Put this way, what Anselm is arguing is that since, if something does not exist, its nonexistence is conceivable, it is not possible for the being whose nonexistence is *inconceivable* not to exist. For how could it be true of the being whose nonexistence is inconceivable that its nonexistence is conceivable? Anselm in this response to Gaunilo shows himself deaf to Gaunilo's point, which is, quite simply, that if there is a being than which no greater can be conceived, then there is a necessary being whose nonexistence is inconceivable. But if God does not exist, it is indeed conceivable that *there is no* being whose nonexistence is inconceivable. Until someone establishes that there is such a being, we cannot be certain that God exists even if someone who *is* that than which nothing greater can be conceived will exist and will exist necessarily, and will, moreover, exist in such a way that its nonexistence would be inconceivable.

VII. CONCLUSION

I hope to have shown that Rowe is more right than he knows. What Anselm proves — although it is not this that he means to prove — is that God (a being than which nothing greater can be conceived) is a Godan. Whether there are Godans or not is an empirical matter that no definition can resolve. This situation precisely parallels that of the *magician*: although *magicans* are defined as existing (real) magicians, whether or not there are any is an empirical matter. The only difference between the two cases is that Anselm provides an ingenious argument in the case of God that could not work in the case of magicians: he proves that no God can be a Godo and so any God must be a Godan, something that cannot be proved in the case of magician, *magico*, and *magician*. Nevertheless, just as even if, counterfactually, every magician could be shown to have to be a *magician*, that would not guarantee that there are any *magicans*, so too, even though any God must be a Godan, that does not ensure that there are any Godans.

Anselm's failure is not one of question-begging. Anselm never defines the God with which he begins, a being than which nothing greater can be conceived, as existent or, a fortiori, as necessarily existent. It is a *magician*, not

a magician, that no nonexistent thing can be; it is a Godan or a Godan_n, not God, that no nonexistent thing can be. But just as there need not be anything that is a magican there need be anything that is a Godan. Indeed, for Anselm or anyone to prove that drawing out the logical consequences of the concept God yields not simply a conceptually real God but an actually real one, he would surely have to be a magician — or, shall we say, a magican.