

## Comments on Problem Set 1

### General comments

Some commonly misused words:

‘valid’: this word has a technical sense in philosophy. It applies to arguments, not claims, theories, etc.; an argument is *valid* if the premises imply the conclusion, whether or not the premises are themselves true. A *sound* argument is a valid argument with true premises.

‘prove’: to *prove* that  $p$  is to give an argument for  $p$  that is so strong that it puts  $p$  beyond all reasonable doubt. If you say that someone has proved something, this is what you are committed to. You almost never want to say this.

‘refute’: to *refute* a claim is to prove that it is false. You won’t be using this term much either.

More frequently misused words are listed at Jim Pryor’s “philosophical terms and methods”, [linked to from the course webpage](#),

1. In the handout distributed in class on September 8<sup>th</sup>, I presented the following reconstruction of Clarke’s argument for the existence of a necessary being:

Let  $S$  be the series of all contingent beings.

P1. The fact that  $S$  exists has an explanation.

P2. An explanation of the fact that  $S$  exists cannot itself be a fact about contingent beings.

P3. But an explanation of the fact that  $S$  exists must be a fact about some being or other.

C. Therefore, there is at least one necessary being.

For each of the three premises of this argument, briefly explain one reason why someone might believe the premise, and one reason why someone might doubt it.

Lots of people claimed that P1 followed from the “Principle of Sufficient Reason” without saying what this principle is.

‘Contingent being’ means ‘being that does not necessarily exist’. It does not mean ‘being whose existence is explained by something else’, or anything like that! So the claim that  $S$  is a contingent being isn’t enough on its own to justify P1.

The second and third parts of this question turned out to be extremely hard. As I was thinking of the argument, P2 and P3 were meant to be *independent* of P1: that is, even if you denied that there was any explanation of  $S$ , you might agree with what P2 and P3 say about what such an explanation would have to be like, supposing that there was one.

2. 'Whatever is understood, exists in the understanding' (Anselm, *Proslogium*, p. 54) Explain as clearly as you can what this premise means and what role it plays in St. Anselm's argument for the existence of God. Is the premise true? Briefly defend your answer.

Many people gave explanations of 'exists in the understanding' according to which the things that exist in the understanding are *concepts* or *ideas* or some other such entities. I'm not sure exactly what concepts or ideas are supposed to be, but I suppose that unicorns, for example, are not concepts. A *concept* of a unicorn is one thing, a *unicorn* is something else entirely. But St. Anselm's principle is supposed to entail that such things as unicorns exist in the understanding, whether or not they also exist in reality. It wouldn't do St. Anselm much good if all that were true were that a *concept* of a being than which none greater can be conceived exists in the understanding: such a concept needn't itself be a being than which none greater can be conceived.

In class, I suggested that St. Anselm's principle might be understood along the following lines: for any  $x$ , and any expression we might plug in for the letter 'F'

If  $x$  clearly conceives of an F, then an F exists in  $x$ 's understanding.

Even if this isn't quite the right wording, given the role the principle plays in St. Anselm's argument it seems that something along these lines must be right.

3. In Part 9 of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Hume argues that there can be no *a priori* proof of the existence of a God, or for that matter of anything else:

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

*Is this a good argument? Defend your answer.*

'Demonstrable' means 'provable *a priori*'. While Hume uses 'demonstrable' and 'necessary' interchangeably, you shouldn't. There's nothing obviously incoherent in the suggestion that a certain being exists necessarily, even though we cannot give an *a priori* proof of the existence of that being.

A surprising number of people who claimed in their answer to question 2 that the ontological argument is unsound gave what seemed to be versions of the ontological argument in their answers to this question!

Several people suggested that there's some special difficulty in conceiving *oneself* as non-existent. This is an interesting claim, but I'm not sure what the difficulty is supposed to be. It seems to me that I can easily conceive of a world in which my parents never met, or even a world in which there aren't any people at all.

There may be something problematic about *believing* that one doesn't exist, but conceiving isn't the same thing as believing.