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Are Propositions Divine Thoughts?

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Abstract: James Anderson and Greg Welty maintain that God's existence can be demonstrated on account of the necessary existence of the laws of logic. One consequence of their argument is the stipulation that propositions are divine thoughts. In this philosophical note, I object that this conclusion entails either that God's thoughts are numerically identical to human thoughts, or that human thoughts contain elements internal to God's mind.

James Anderson and Greg Welty maintain that God's existence can be demonstrated on account of the necessary existence of the laws of logic.¹ In point of fact, their demonstration only depends upon some necessarily existent proposition, like mathematical or analytic truths, and not on the laws of logic *per se*. Indeed, as *abstracta*, all propositions necessarily exist (though not all are necessarily true), and so any proposition will presumably do. But the laws of logic are sufficient for their purpose, and, as they correctly observe, their argument is capable of accommodating all sorts of interpretations of these laws (including, for instance, formulations in paraconsistent logic). Let us grant then that the laws of logic—whether classical or nonclassical—exist. Their argument in essentials is this:

1. The laws of logic are propositions.
2. Propositions are intrinsically (or originally) intentional.
3. Something is intrinsically intentional only if it is mental (i.e. is a thought).
4. Therefore, the laws of logic are thoughts.
5. The laws of logic exist necessarily.
6. If the laws of logic are necessarily existent thoughts, then they are the thoughts of a necessarily existent mind.

¹ James N. Anderson and Greg Welty, "The Lord of Noncontradiction: An Argument for God from Logic," *Philosophia Christi* 13:2 (2011): 321-338. In their words: "[W]e will argue that there are laws of logic *because* God exists; indeed, there are laws of logic *only* because God exists," Ibid. 321.

7. Therefore, there exists a necessarily existent mind.

My focus in this article solely concerns the third premise: that is, the assertion that something is intrinsically intentional *only if* it is a thought. While my preferred position is nominalism about abstract objects, I assume *propositional realism* throughout: that propositions are (with respect to human subjects) non-linguistic, mind-independent entities. As such, the remaining premises will not factor into the present critique. Instead, I argue that Anderson and Welty's contention that propositions—such as the laws of logic—are divine thoughts entails that our thoughts are numerically identical to God's thoughts. I take it for granted that this is problematic, insofar as it requires the unorthodox claim that human beings literally partake of the divine mind. Once more, it is worth noting that this objection applies more generally to *divine conceptualism* and certain versions of *theistic activism*, and is not limited to the foregoing argument.

I. Divine Thoughts

The third premise introduces a necessary condition for intrinsic intentionality—namely that, if anything is intrinsically intentional, then it is mental. Something is derivatively intentional if it indicates or is about something on account of the intentionality of something else. Pieces of popcorn for instance do not in themselves indicate basketball players, but *we* are capable of using such pieces as a means of representing players, in order (say) to depict a particular play in some game.² In contrast, our own mental activity appears to be intrinsically intentional, since my thought that “The tree in my backyard is lovely” seems to be about that very tree, and this independently of any other intentionality conferring apparatus. Anderson and Welty contend that there is “good reason to regard intentionality as *the distinctive mark of the mental*,” because mental items like beliefs, desires, hopes, and so forth, are all intentional, whereas non-mental items like rocks, clouds, flutes, and so on, are not.³ They thusly

² The example is from Fred Dretske, *Explaining Behavior* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 52-54. It is worth observing that Dretske's discussion of *indicators*—like tracks in the snow, compasses, a tree's rings, bird songs, finger prints, thermometers, bathroom scales—count as potential examples of non-mental intentional entities. Unlike Anderson and Welty, Dretske regards *misrepresentation* and not intentionality as the mark of the mental. As such, Anderson and Welty need to demonstrate that Dretske's examples of indicators are *not* non-mental intentional entities or phenomena; otherwise their pivotal argument from parsimony for (3) is suspect.

³ Anderson and Welty, “The Law of Noncontradiction,” p. 334.

conclude that, “Thoughts are the paradigmatic category of intentional entities.”⁴ But there is some ambiguity over their use of the term “thought.”

What constitutes a thought? This is a difficult question that I certainly do not intend to settle here. But Anderson and Welty repeatedly characterize propositions—specifically, the laws of logic—*themselves* as thoughts, suggesting that there is nothing more to thoughts than the propositions themselves. Thus they write: “[S]ince the laws of logic are propositional in nature and thus exhibit intrinsic intentionality, they are best characterized as mental entities—as *thoughts*—rather than as physical entities or *sui generis* entities.”⁵ It seems then that propositions just are thoughts. But, in other places, the authors refer to thoughts as beliefs, desires, hopes, and so forth.⁶ And, as they themselves note, these *propositional attitudes* can be represented as open sentences of the form, “I believe that *p*,” “I hope that *p*,” and so on, where *p* is a variable ranging over propositions.⁷ Let function “*R*” denote the propositional attitude “I believe that *p*.” It should be obvious that we have some inconsistency here. Thoughts cannot *both* be identical to propositions *and* propositional attitudes plus some proposition; in other words, for some thought *b* and proposition *A*, it is impossible that $b = A$, and $b = R(A)$. The proposition itself is distinct from some mind’s believing that proposition, and thus some thought *b* cannot be identical to both. I think the unnecessary confusion stems from Frege’s use of *Gedanken*. Frege clearly did not regard propositions as mental items; in fact, he went at great lengths to distinguish propositions—*Gedanken*—from ideas, the latter alone corresponding to mental or psychological items.⁸ He referred to propositions as *Gedanken* because the propositional content of our thoughts (or ideas) seem to constitute the most practically important element of our thoughts (or ideas).

The distinction between thoughts as propositional attitudes plus propositions and propositions *simpliciter* is relevant for what is to follow, and is not intended as an objection. But here I do want to offer a preliminary criticism of (3). It seems that part of the motivation for (3) is the intuition that something is intrinsically intentional *because* it is mental. Thus Anderson and Welty write:

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. 335.

⁶ Ibid. 334.

⁷ Ibid. 328.

⁸ Contrary to Anderson and Welty’s suggestion at fn. 29. Thus in “On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*” Frege writes: “By a thought I understand not the subjective performance of thinking but its objective content, which is capable of being the common property of several thinkers,” in *The Frege Reader*, trans. Michael Beaney (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 156, fn. E.

There is certainly a sense in which physical marks on a page...can exhibit intentionality. But it is equally evident that this intentionality is *derivative*; it is dependent on the prior activity of a *mind*. The physical marks exhibit intentionality only insofar as they express *thoughts*. Without minds conferring meaning upon them, no physical structures would ever be *about* anything else, for only a mind has the intrinsic power to *direct* thoughts... It is the mental—and only the mental—that exhibits intentionality intrinsically. It is the mental that confers intentionality on the nonmental.⁹

The claim is that sentences, themselves physical entities, are derivatively intentional because their aboutness depends upon the activity of a mind: “for only a mind has the intrinsic power to *direct* thoughts...”¹⁰ If it can be shown that something—like a proposition—can be intentional *without* someone’s mind doing the directing, then perhaps this opens the way for something’s being intentional despite its being non-mental. Suppose that Romulus is ignorant of which explorer discovered the Pacific Ocean. Nevertheless, he recognizes that some explorer did in fact discover it, and asserts that “The explorer who discovered the Pacific Ocean was adventurous.” Now the proposition expressed by this sentence—in particular, the definite description imbedded therein—is *about* Vasco Núñez de Balboa, and as such successfully refers. But here the definite description refers *despite* Romulus’s ignorance; that is, independent of his mind’s doing the directing. We are thus presented with a case in which a proposition exhibits intentionality independent of the required sort of mental activity. Indeed, standard models have it that the definite description successfully refers on account of the meaning of the terms involved, such that “The explorer who discovered the Pacific Ocean” is about Balboa because he has (or had) the property of *being the explorer who discovered the Pacific Ocean*. Since propositions (and as such the referring expressions they at times contain) are intentional on account of the mental activity of some mind, on Anderson and Welty’s interpretation, they seem to debar anything like an attributive use of definite descriptions.¹¹ But it seems to me that an attributive characterization of definite descriptions best accounts for their intentionality, and not some form of mental activity. Since one common conception of propositions is just that they are the meaning of

⁹ Ibid. 334.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See Keith Donnellan, “Reference and Definite Descriptions,” *The Philosophical Review* 75 (July 1966):281-304. Definite descriptions are used attributively if they refer in the sense specified above. In contrast, definite descriptions are used referentially if the description refers not on account of the meanings of the terms involved.

sentences, and since an attributive conception characterizes meaning as the source of reference, it would seem that propositions embody intrinsic intentionality.¹² If this is correct, then (3) is false.

I offer this as a preliminary criticism because there is a way to extricate Anderson and Welty's argument from it. The contention that meaning accounts for aboutness or reference places pressure on (3), because, if propositions just are the semantic content of sentences, then propositions manifest intrinsic intentionality. But it is plausible to think that meaning, in order to exist, requires the existence of some mind, and thus that necessarily existent propositions (that is, meanings) require a necessarily existent mind. The debate as such would be redirected toward a discussion of meaning and away from the notion of intrinsic intentionality, since propositions *would* constitute intrinsically intentional entities. Moreover, the discussion would likely turn to the plausibility of propositional realism (or the plausibility of accounting for meaning on propositional antirealism), and, as noted, this is not our focus here.

But let us move to my primary objection. As we have seen, propositions are divine thoughts on Anderson and Welty's model. The proposition that expresses the law of noncontradiction—let us denote it by A —is a *mental* item, indeed, the mental item of a divine mind. Unlike rocks, clouds, flutes, and so forth, which are not mental, propositions on the above account are the constituents of a specific mind—in particular, God's mind. Traditionally, the contents of a specific mind are thought to be private, such that while it is possible for two distinct subjects to both perceive the same public object—like a rock—it is impossible for one subject to perceive the ideas or thoughts of another subject. Your thoughts are yours and my thoughts are mine. Suppose that we assume the first conception of “thought” discussed above—such that a thought just is a proposition—then, since thoughts just are propositions, it follows that:

8. (God's thought that A) = A .

Imagine also that Romulus entertains the proposition that A . In other words, Romulus is thinking about or has a thought concerning the law of noncontradiction. Again, since thoughts just are propositions, it is true that:

9. (Romulus's thought that A) = A .

¹² Anderson and Welty may want to claim that the definite description “The explorer who discovered the Pacific Ocean” is intentional because *God*, in entertaining the description, is thinking about Balboa. As such, while Romulus successfully refers to Balboa despite his ignorance, he does so *only because* God's mind renders the description or proposition intentional. I myself find this to be an implausible picture of things (if only because I find attributive interpretations to be largely correct), but I recognize that it does count as a possible response to the above considerations. However, as will become apparent below, this response does not survive my primary criticism.

Therefore:

10. (God's thought that A) = Romulus's thought that A .

(10) is an expression of numerical identity. It is important not to be misled by our colloquial way of speaking: God and Romulus do not have two distinct tokens of the same type of thought. Rather, they share the same *thought-token*. Romulus's thought that A is numerically identical to God's thought that A in precisely the same sense that Cicero is numerically identical to Tully. Romulus for instance might think the same thought as Remus—say, that “The explorer who discovered the Pacific Ocean was adventurous”—yet Romulus's act or instance of thinking this kind of thought is distinct from Remus's act or instance of thinking it. But, (10) stipulates more than this kind of qualitative congruence. The conclusion here is that God's thought that A , as a mental item internal to God's mind, is numerically identical to the mental item internal to Romulus's mind. But, the conclusion that our thoughts are identical to God's thoughts is unacceptable, for certainly this (at the very least) violates the fundamental division between creator and creature. It seems then that propositions cannot be divine thoughts.

But maybe our second account of what constitutes a “thought” fares better. While I think this account—where “thoughts” just are the conjunction of a propositional attitude with some proposition—is closer to the mark, it still engenders difficulties. On this account God's thought that A is identical to $G(A)$, where the function “ G ” stands for the open sentence, “God believes that p .” Since a thought on this interpretation is the subsumption of a proposition within a propositional attitude (conceived as a function), it is true that:

11. (God's thought that A) = $G(A)$

Similarly we can say that Romulus's thought that A is identical to $R(A)$, where “ R ” now reads, “Romulus believes that p .” Thus:

12. (Romulus's thought that A) = $R(A)$

This avoids any sort of numerical identity between God's thoughts and human thoughts. Yet, problems emerge. Recall that A is *in* God's mind, and as such is a constituent of God's thought. This is demanded by the account that Anderson and Welty offer: propositions are specific mental items of the divine mind. But while it is true that on this account Romulus's thought that A is not identical to God's thought that A —since $G(A) \neq R(A)$ —it does follow that Romulus's thought contains as a constituent an element internal to God's mind. On the standard (or original) picture—where the existence of propositions is external to any mind—God's thinking that A and Romulus's thinking that A involves their grasping the same entity, though this entity is external to *both* their minds. However, on the present account, Romulus's thinking that A entails that Romulus has within *his* mind an item internal to *God's* mental life—namely, A

itself. Our second characterization of what constitutes a “thought,” then, does little to obviate the difficulties expressed above. Propositions as such cannot be divine thoughts or internal to divine thoughts.

II. Responses

What are some potential responses to the above objection? Since either (8) or (11) appear to be stipulated on account of the theory itself, the only feasible way of circumventing the objection is to deny either of (9) or (12). Maybe the law of noncontradiction is identical to one of God’s thoughts or is a component of one God’s thoughts, but such that human thoughts are mere approximations of God’s exemplar thoughts. On this understanding either of (8) or (11) are true:

8. (God’s thought that A) = A .

Or:

11. (God’s thought that A) = $G(A)$.

And A is internal to God’s mind on either of (8) or (11), since *ex hypothesi* A is not something that exists external to God’s mind. We are assuming some form of propositional realism and thus it seems natural to interpret A as a universal, such that human thoughts are particular token exemplifications of this universal or type. The specific manner in which human thoughts are distinctively token exemplifications of God’s universal thoughts is not important; though, to give but one example, it may be that God’s thoughts are always non-linguistic whereas human thoughts are always expressed in some language. The idea is that Romulus’s thinking about the law of noncontradiction always occurs within some language—for instance, Romulus’s thought that B might involve the English sentence “For any proposition, that proposition cannot both be true and false at the same time and in the same sense,” or “ $(p) \neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$,” or either of these in French—and that B is an instantiation of the more general type A , in much the same way that the yellow coloration of a leaf is a particular instantiation of *yellowness*.¹³

The problem with this response is that it fails to avoid the above criticisms. Propositions are often thought to fulfill at least one of three roles: (i) propositions are those entities that are capable of receiving a truth value, (ii)

¹³ Thanks are due to Marc Belcastro for this suggestion. I personally cannot comprehend the suggestion that God’s thoughts are types (any more than I can comprehend what it means for God or anyone to have *yellowness* as an object of thought). I find Hume’s discussion of the controversy between Locke and Berkeley to be definitive here: there can be no abstract idea of *triangularity*, one that encompasses all varieties of triangles. But, as mentioned in the introduction, I intend to assume propositional realism throughout and thus do not object on this account.

propositions are those entities that are capable of constituting the meaning of sentences, or (iii) propositions are those entities that factor as objects of psychological states or propositional attitudes. Now Anderson and Welty may wish to endorse any number or combination of these, but what is presently relevant is that an acceptance of (ii) engenders difficulties for their argument, and yet (ii) serves as one of the most plausible accounts of what constitutes a proposition.¹⁴ We must modify (ii) however so as not to beg the question against the view under consideration, for the present rebuttal has it that God's thoughts are non-linguistic propositions, and (ii) states that propositions are those entities that constitute the meaning of *sentences*, the latter embodying a kind of linguistic item. We can avoid the difficulty by modifying (ii) to (iv): propositions are those entities that are capable of constituting the meaning of sentences or thoughts (including those thoughts that are not the product of some form of sentential expression). Presumably, (coherent) thoughts require the expression of some semantic content no less than (coherent) sentences, and, since God's thoughts are not linguistic on the present hypothesis, God's thoughts still possess meaning and thus constitute expressions of propositions under (iv). This modification avoids the above worry. But, if propositions are those entities that constitute the meaning of sentences or thoughts, then, the following holds:

13. $A = \text{the meaning of "A."}$

Let A be the proposition, "The first line of Gray's *Elegy* is excellently written." In this case (13) asserts that, "The first line of Gray's *Elegy* is excellently written = the meaning of "The first line of Gray's *Elegy* is excellently written." Note that this holds because we are dealing with propositions and not other kinds of semantic items. If, instead, our concern were with (e.g.) definite descriptions, (13) would be false. The following for instance is false: "The first line of Gray's *Elegy* = the meaning of "The first line of Gray's *Elegy*." This is because the left hand side of the identity sign refers to "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day," that is, the first line of Gray's *Elegy*; and evidently "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day" is not identical in meaning to "The first line of Gray's *Elegy*." Since we are concerned with propositions and not definite descriptions, (13) remains true. But, if correct, and if thoughts are identical to propositions or identical to propositional attitudes plus some proposition, then it follows from (8) and (13) that:

¹⁴ See Anderson and Welty, "The Lord of Noncontradiction," p.323 for an endorsement of (i) and the above quotation for a seeming endorsement of (ii). Philosophers commonly define propositions in terms of only one of the three roles they play, even though they accept some of the others. Indeed, it would be odd to say that propositions are the bearers of truth and falsity and yet not the semantic content of sentences. It thus seems natural to assume that Anderson and Welty endorse (ii).

14. (God's thought that A) = the meaning of " A ."

Or (11) and (13):

15. (God's thought that A) = G (the meaning of " A ").

Both (14) and (15) culminate in the same difficulties offered in the previous section. For consider Romulus's thought that B : "For any proposition, that proposition cannot both be true and false at the same time and in the same sense." The meaning of " B " just is the meaning of " A ," otherwise God and Romulus would not be (qualitatively) thinking the same thought, and thus in a sense would be talking past one another. God's assertion that A and Romulus's assertion that B would not be assertions about the same state of affairs. Yet we are supposing that God and Romulus are thinking the same thing, but merely in different ways. Thus:

1 (The meaning of " B ") = the meaning of " A ."

2 (Romulus's thought that B) = the meaning of " B " as expressed in English,

However (16) and entail:

18. (Romulus's thought that B) = the meaning of " A " as expressed in English.

Given (13) and (18), and substitution *salva veritate*, it follows that:

19. (Romulus's thought that B) = A as expressed in English.

But recall that A is *internal* to God's mind: (8) has it that God's thought that A *just is* A , and (11) stipulates that A is a component internal to God's thought. In this case it is true to say that God's thought is non-linguistic whereas Romulus's thought is linguistic, but it also holds that an element of Romulus's thought—namely, A , or what comes to the same thing, the meaning of " A "—is numerically identical to God's thought, given (14), or numerically identical to a part or feature of God's thought, given (15). The same holds if we reinterpret (17) through (19), for Romulus's thoughts, in terms of the thoughts as propositional attitudes plus some proposition account. (This should be obvious given the foregoing. I will not make this point explicit here.) For any interpretation of what constitutes Romulus's thoughts—thoughts just as propositions or as propositional attitudes plus some proposition—the contexts involved are extensional, and thus the substitutions are warranted. Even if (Romulus's thought that B) = $R(B)$, it follows that (Romulus's thought that B) = R (the meaning of " B "), and ultimately that (Romulus's thought that B) = $R(A)$, since we are concerned with semantic identity when making our substitutions. Thus, Romulus's thoughts get at aspects internal to God's mind, rendering them publicly accessible. Hence the proposed response does not succeed.

Anderson and Welty may wish to deny (16). Perhaps what God and

Romulus assert are not identical in meaning, though sufficiently close enough in meaning to avoid their talking past one another. For instance, someone might assert that, “Marcus moved slowly through the labyrinth,” while someone else, referring to the same person, might assert that, “Marcus moved through the labyrinth.” The meanings of both claims are distinct, but there is a sense in which they are talking about the same thing. So maybe (16) is false and yet God’s and Romulus’s thoughts are sufficiently similar so as to be talking about the same thing. But this response will not do. Note that on this approach A and B denote distinct propositions—after all, A and B are distinct in meaning—and that B is not grounded in the mental life of God. But B just is an expression, however imperfect or impure in light of God’s similar yet distinct thought, of the law of noncontradiction, a necessary truth. As such, there are necessarily true propositions—namely, B —that are *not* divine thoughts or constituents of divine thoughts. This entails that premise (6) of Anderson and Welty’s original argument is false. There would be no reason to suppose that necessarily existent propositions require the existence of a divine mind, which of course is required in order for their argument to successfully demonstrate God’s existence.

There is however a way around this criticism, but it strikes me as evidently *ad hoc* and thus not very promising. Apart from our introducing an overwhelmingly large number of novel propositions—for now we have a class of existent propositions that are solely the object of God’s thought and a class of existent propositions that are solely the object of human thought (or thoughts of persons other than God)—God could believe, in the particular case at hand, B -type propositions at all those temporal moments at which no person other than God believes the relevant B -type propositions. To illustrate, supposing that for all persons distinct from God, there is some person (it need not be the same person) who thinks that B from times t_0 to t_1 , and such that no person distinct from God thinks that B at any time after t_1 , God thinks that B for all times after t_1 . This would ground B ’s necessity. God in a sense stops thinking (in the case under consideration) B -type propositions when other persons distinct from him think B -type propositions, so as to avoid their thinking the numerically same thoughts as him, and then picks up the slack (so to speak) when persons distinct from him are not around to think these propositions or simply fail to think these propositions. But certainly this is not preferable. The hypothesis under consideration might explain everything—that is, it has high explanatory power—but an inevitable consequence of this is that it has profoundly lower prior probability. The traditional account of propositions as external entities seems to possess at least as much explanatory power, and yet is far simpler, and thus seems preferable. Moreover, this route also suffers from a numerical identity of thoughts between all those persons

distinct from God, for the very reasons given above (unless of course we admit the undesirable conclusion of similar yet unique propositions for every person). It seems then that this response is not a viable alternative.

The suggestion that propositions are divine thoughts (or constituents of divine thoughts) leads to undesirable conclusions. I have shown that this contention entails that human thoughts are either numerically identical to God's thoughts, or that human thoughts contain elements numerically identical to elements internal to God's mind. Either alternative is unacceptable for the orthodox theist.

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