

“Great God in boots! - the ontological argument is sound!”

In *Russell 18* Douglas Lackey offers "a puzzle for scholars". Although I have no insights into Lackey's puzzle, I would like to share with readers the *solution* to another puzzle. In the first volume of the *Autobiography*, Russell speaks of an incident that occurred just before his Moral Science Tripos in Spring, 1894. At this time, Russell was favourably disposed towards the philosophies of Kant and Hegel, but he had not yet committed himself completely; he was avidly reading Bradley and "... admired him more than any other philosopher".¹ One day Russell was walking along Trinity Lane having just bought a tin of tobacco. Suddenly, he threw the tin up in the air, and at the same time uttered the words "Great God in boots!--the ontological argument is sound!"² In the published accounts of this story, Russell stated that due to this occurrence, he turned Hegelian.³ Unfortunately, the significance of the story has

¹"My Mental Development" in P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, 4th ed. (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1971), p. 10.

²*The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1872-1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967), p. 63; "My Mental Development", p. 10. See also Russell's "A Turning-Point in My Life" in Leonard Russell (ed.), *The Saturday Book*, 8 (1948), 142. ("My Mental Development" has "Great Scott" instead of "Great God in boots!")

³In several undergraduate essays, written prior to this incident, Russell does espouse neo-Hegelian doctrines. In "Paper on Epistemology I", dated November 1893, he maintains that every science abstracts. In order to overcome the one-sidedness of the sciences, epistemology must presuppose the oneness and intelligibility of the world and that knowledge can be unified. Russell himself says that he resisted Hegelian influences at the beginning of his fourth year at Cambridge. See *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), p. 38; Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell: "Throughout the greater part of the year [1893-4] I remained quite unconvinced of Hegelianism" (letter no. 199, September 28, 1911, original at Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin). The reader should be aware that Russell does not distinguish between "Hegelianism" (the doctrines of Hegel himself) and "neo-Hegelianism" (the doctrines held by the British Idealists, such as Bradley, Bosanquet, etc.). I have followed Russell's usage when speaking of his "conversion to Hegelianism".

not been explained. Likewise, commentators have reported the incident, but they have not taken the pains to unravel its mysteries.⁴

Originally devised by St. Anselm to prove God's existence, the ontological argument has been advocated in modified forms by Duns Scotus, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and, more recently, Norman Malcolm. It has also been severely criticized by Anselm's contemporary, Guano, Aquinas, Kant and, ironically, even the later Russell.⁵ Since it is a purely *a priori* demonstration, it has been a favourite among religious metaphysicians. In its Cartesian formulation, the argument's initial premiss begins with a definition of God to the effect that He is an entity containing all perfections. It is then argued that one of the perfections must be existence itself. We are supposedly left with the outcome that the concept of God, unlike other concepts, includes in its very nature that God is an existent entity. The criticisms of this argument are quite familiar to philosophers, and we need not go into them. It is generally recognized that the argument is unsound.

Russell gave up his belief in God's existence at the age of eighteen. There is no evidence that he ever returned to this belief. Yet, if he accepted the ontological argument in 1894, the conclusion of that argument would have forced him to acknowledge God's existence. There is a further complication. Suppose that Russell did accept the conclusion of the ontological argument. What possible bearing could a belief in God's existence have on his conversion to Hegelianism? Although McTaggart believed in personal immortality, he was an adamant atheist and had "a positive dislike for the conception of God".⁶ Other neo-Hegelians such as Bradley and Bosanquet took another point of view. For them, the question of whether God does or does not exist cannot be answered direct-

ly with a "yes" or "no".⁷ Since we can talk about what is not God, the notion of God, they argued, must be metaphysically incomplete. It demands something other than itself for its completion, whether this be mankind, the creation, or whatever.⁸ The notion of God therefore cannot be attributed to reality without qualification. Furthermore, some relations must hold between God and what is not God. These relations, like all other relations, were regarded by Bradley and Bosanquet as contradictory and, consequently, as fatal to God's ultimate reality. God however can still be said to possess a high degree of reality because He requires less metaphysical qualification than other ordinary phenomena.

A clue to this puzzle--that is, the connection between the ontological argument and Russell's conversion to Hegelianism--is to be found in *Portraits from Memory*: "Hegel thought of the universe as a closely knit unity.... The only reality was the Absolute, which was his name for God."⁹ For the neo-Hegelians, excluding McTaggart, the Absolute was a convenient label for the ultimate and perfect stage of reality, a complete union of every side of our being, where intuition, feeling, sense and intellect are one experience.¹⁰ A corollary of the doctrine of the Absolute is that when we consider any part of the Absolute in itself, cut off from its other parts, we necessarily distort and falsify the oneness of everything. Neo-Hegelians such as Bradley and Bosanquet would object therefore to the first premiss of the ontological argument. For them, God cannot be conceived as the most perfect being. At most, God can only be one aspect of the Absolute; divorced from other phenomena, God must be condemned as appearance. It should be noted that this criticism does not attack the logical form of the ontological argument. The first premiss is criticized on the ground that the defined entity supposedly does not fit the description. In other words, it leaves open the possibility that the argument may be sound if God is replaced by an entity fitting the description.

The solution to the puzzle became clear to me when, by chance, I

⁴Examples of such commentators are: Ronald Jager, *The Development of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), p. 47; E. Rivero, *Il Pensiero di Bertrand Russell*, 3rd ed. (Naples: Libreria Scientifica Editrice, 1972), p. 25; Ronald W. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Cape/Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), p. 45; G.D. Bowne, *The Philosophy of Logic, 1880-1908* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. 61. Bowne gives an explanation of Moore's early realism and suggests that, in view of Moore's puzzling discussion of existence, he, like the young Russell, may have "seen" the validity of the ontological argument.

⁵"On Denoting", in R.C. Marsh (ed.), *Logic and Knowledge* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956), p. 54; *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1919), pp. 203-4; *Why I am not a Christian* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957), pp. 141-2.

⁶G. Lowes Dickinson, *J. McT. E. McTaggart* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), pp. 86-7. McTaggart's influence upon Russell was so overwhelming that for a short time Russell believed in immortality. See Russell's letter to Alys Russell of October 29, 1894: "For a few months last autumn, after reading Green and McTaggart I believed in immortality --but Green's mistakes were soon evident to me, and since then I have had no solution--I believe no other is possible."

⁷"My Religious Reminiscences" in R.E. Egner and L.E. Denonn (eds.), *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), p. 34; *Autobiography, 1872-1914*, p. 186: "Then there are the philosophers, like Bradley, who keep a shadow of religion, too little for comfort, but quite enough to ruin their systems intellectually."

⁸F.H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality, A Metaphysical Essay*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1897, 9th impression [corrected and reset], 1930, reprinted with an introduction by Richard Wollheim, 1969), pp. 395-6; Wollheim, *F.H. Bradley*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 266-8.

⁹"Why I took to Philosophy" in *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. 17.

¹⁰*Appearance and Reality*, pp. 129, 200, 370-1; Bradley, "Relations III Appendix" in *Collected Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), II, 653-4.

came across the following passage in Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*:

But the ontological argument, it will be rightly said, makes no pretence of being applicable to every finite matter: It is used of the Absolute, and if confined to that, will be surely legitimate. We are, I think, bound to admit this claim. The idea of the Absolute, as an idea, is inconsistent with itself; and we find that to complete itself, it is internally driven to take in existence.¹¹

In Bradley's opinion, the Absolute is the perfect entity of the ontological argument. The Absolute, as perfect and not existing, is a contradiction in terms. One of the elements of the Absolute's perfection is its existence.

At this point, the puzzle was solved. Russell, following Bradley, had substituted "the Absolute" for every occurrence of the word "God". Russell's acceptance of the ontological argument forced him to accept the doctrine of the Absolute--that is, Bradley's metaphysics. What was needed to guarantee this interpretation was confirmation from Russell's early writings. I found such evidence in a number of places. In one of his undergraduate essays, "Paper on Descartes II", dated May 1894, Russell has the following to say on the matter:

But those who wish to maintain the ontological argument may reply that whatever we think we cannot get away from reality; if we judge at all, we must affirm some predicate of reality; even negative judgment is only possible owing to some positive incompatible ground, i.e. must be based on an affirmation; but if we try to deny reality as a whole, there is no positive ground left as basis of our denial. We must think the Absolute, and its essence involves existence; hence the ontological argument can, it would seem, only be met by complete scepticism, by abstaining from judgment altogether; which is a negligible alternative.¹²

The implicit thinking in the above passage stems from Bradley's theory

¹¹*Appearance and Reality*, p. 351; also pp. 131-2, 217, 349-54. See also J.E. Barnhardt, "Bradley's Monism and Whitehead's Neo-Pluralism", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 7 (1969), 396. For Hegel's use of the ontological argument, see John Hick, "Ontological Argument for the Existence of God", in P. Edwards (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), V, 540.

¹²"Paper on Descartes III", May 1894, Russell Archives typescript, pp. 1-2. See also Russell's Undergraduate Notebook 1 1893-1894, Lent term 1894, G.F. Stout's History of Philosophy course, p. 142: "This true: whole of reality must exist, and must be completion of any fragment we happen to know."; "Is Ethics a Branch of Empirical Psychology?", read to the Society, February 6, 1897, Russell Archives typescript, pp. 5-6: "The ultimate premiss of any subject should have an evidence which cannot be questioned. The premiss of Logic and Metaphysics is that truth is true of reality, and that some knowledge is true. This depends on the ontological argument, which again depends on the impossibility of total scepticism." See also the discussion of Bradley and the ontological argument in Russell's *Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*, 2nd ed. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1937), p. 177. Also, Moore refers to the Hegelian form of this argument in his unpublished lectures of 1898, "The Elements of Ethics" (photocopy of typescript in Russell Archives), p. 178.

of judgment. For Bradley, every judgment implies that an idea as meaning has been referred to reality. Without its reference to reality, an idea is "a false abstraction" and "a self-contradiction".¹³ The idea of the Absolute is inconsistent with itself. To think the Absolute immediately implies that such an idea has reference to the Absolute's existence. Russell reasoned that there were two alternatives open to him: either to refrain from judgment altogether and to embrace scepticism, or to make judgments and to accept the doctrine of the Absolute. Not wishing to be left with the barrenness of scepticism, Russell espoused the latter alternative and with it, the ontological argument.

The puzzle was solved once and for all when I found the following passage in one of Russell's letters to Lady Ottoline Morrell:

Stout, who chiefly taught me, persuaded me that it [Hegelianism] all turned on the ontological argument. This argument, in the crude form invented by Archbishop Anselm ... is: "God is the subject of all perfections; existence is a perfection; therefore God exists"; or "God is the most perfect Being; what exists is more perfect than what does not exist; therefore God exists". The argument has been subtilized since, and now it proves the Absolute, not God. One day, a week before my last Tripos, I ran out of tobacco while I was working, so I went out to get some. As I was coming back with a tin, I suddenly seemed to see truth in the ontological argument. I threw the tin into the air and exclaimed out loud "Great God in boots, the ontological argument is sound". (I can't imagine the reason for such an oath.) So I became a Hegelian, and remained one for about 3 years or 4, till Moore led me to abandon Hegel.¹⁴

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¹³*Appearance and Reality*, p. 350. In the first edition of *The Principles of Logic*, Bradley maintained that ideas need not refer to reality but could be held before the mind without judgment. Bradley called these ideas "floating". Due to Bosanquet's criticism, however, Bradley got rid of floating ideas and insisted that all ideas must refer to reality. See Bradley, "On Floating Ideas and the Imaginary" in *Essays on Truth and Reality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), p. 28; Wollheim, *Bradley*, pp. 89, 173-6.

¹⁴Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell, September 28, 1911, no. 199.