5.6 Oh No! *More* Silly Proofs of God's Existence (p. 127)

Real and Pseudo-Scots

Some digressions before we get to the next silly proof of God's existence.

The interesting and complex universal prover we just looked at is a modification of a puzzle provided by a medieval philosopher called Pseudoscotus.

> **You might be wondering how come somebody's called by that peculiar name. Nobody knows Pseudoscotus's real name. For a long time, his writing was thought to be the work of another medieval philosopher named John Duns Scotus (the 'Scotus' was put at the end because he was a Scot). When it was discovered that it was not, the author came to be known as Pseudoscotus.**
>
> **And you might be interested to know that the word 'dunce' comes from John Duns Scotus's name. Some scholars didn't think very highly of his ability to produce arguments of great logical subtlety and complexity, and during the Renaissance they used the pejorative name 'Dunsman' for students whose philosophical techniques and conclusions they disapproved of; and over the years this epithet got shortened.**

Here's another related argument, attributed to Pseudoscotus:

ARGUMENT 9

P: God exists.
C: THEREFORE this argument is invalid.

Pseudoscotus (like other medievals) took it for granted that the premise was true—in fact it was a necessary truth (true in all possible worlds), so to appreciate the logical complexity of this argument, you'll have to accept that. (If you balk at this, substitute your favourite logical truth, like 'All ducks are ducks' or '1 + 1 = 2'.)

Is the argument valid? To answer this, we ask, as usual: is there a possible world in which the premise is true, but the conclusion false? We've agreed to treat the premise as necessarily true—true in all possible worlds, so we need ask only whether there is any possible world in which the conclusion is false.

Well, what if there is? Assuming there is one, then, given what the conclusion says, in that possible world it's false that this argument is valid—in other words, this argument is valid. But (remember) the conclusion is true, so because the argument is valid, the conclusion must be true. The assumption that there is such a possible world leads to a contradiction, so it must be false. There is no possible world in which the conclusion is false. So that shows that the argument is valid. But then, since the argument is valid, and its premise is true, its conclusion must be true. But its conclusion says that the argument is valid. This is a contradiction also.

So either way, thinking of the argument as valid or invalid, you get a contradiction. That makes this case much more like many of the cases of self-reference we've already looked at (in which, for example, you get a contradiction from assuming a statement is true, and another from assuming it's false).

The Proof with the Bonus

To understand this silly proof of God's existence, you'll need to have a little background knowledge about modern logic.

One of the basic sorts of statement used in systems of logic is the "conditional statement"—a statement of the form "If P then Q." Examples:

> **If it's Tuesday, then we have logic class.**
>
> **If it's below freezing, then the car won't start.**

As they understand the conditional statement, contemporary logicians take the negation—the denial—of a conditional statement to be equivalent to the affirmation of the first part—the "P" part—and the denial of the second part—the Q part. So for example, if we deny "If it's Tuesday, then we have logic class," then this is equivalent to saying that it *is* Tuesday, but we *don't* have logic class.

Those of you who have done a little bit of modern symbolic logic will recognize that these two sentences are provably equivalent: $\sim(P \supset Q)$ and $(P \mathbin{\&} \sim Q)$.

Okay, now consider the conditional statement: "If God exists, then there is unnecessary pain and suffering." We can symbolize this statement as $(G \supset U)$. Believers and unbelievers alike would take this to be a false statement. The existence of God would mean that there's a reason for pain and suffering—it would (somehow) be part of God's plan, all for the best, not unnecessary at all. So everyone must admit that the denial of this conditional statement is true; we can safely take $\sim(G \supset U)$ as the premise of an argument. But this is equivalent to saying $(G \mathbin{\&} \sim U)$. So what immediately logically follows from this is that God exists. Q.E.D.!

And, by the way, as an additional bonus, notice that another thing that follows from this is that there is no unnecessary pain and suffering.[1]

Of course there's a mistake in here. The mistake arises because modern logic assigns that sort of logical behaviour to the material conditional, but this does not reflect what we take the "logic" of "If ... then" statements in English to be. So when everyone admits the denial of that "If ... then" statement about God, nobody is thinking of an "If ... then" construction that behaves like the logicians' material conditional.

We shouldn't conclude from this, by the way, that there's something wrong with modern logic. Modern logicians are very well aware that the "If ... then" statement they use as the basis of elementary symbolic logic is an extremely oversimplified version of what we mean when we use conditional statements in ordinary language. The question of what we really do mean turns out to be quite a difficult one, and there has been a good deal of productive attention paid by modern logic to answering that question.

1 This "proof" was shown to me long ago by C.L. Stevenson (1908–79), the philosopher who was the central figure in emotivist ethics. I think he invented it. At the time, he was interested in the paradoxes of material implication.