

The Laws of Logic, Intentionality and the Existence of God

by Michael Donnan

(1) Introduction

It is argued by James N. Anderson and Greg Welty (2011) that there is a “*metaphysical* relationship between the laws of logic and the existence of God”: specifically, the laws of logic exist “only because God exists” (p.321/1)¹, where God is understood to be a “necessarily existent, personal, spiritual being” (p.322/1). By “laws of logic”, Anderson and Welty (hereinafter A&W) mean the “axiomatic principles of rational thought that govern how truth-valued statements or ideas can be related in truth-preserving ways” (p. 322/2). Prime examples are the law of identity, law of excluded middle and law of non-contradiction (LNC), which last is formulated by A&W thus:

(LNC) No statement can be both true and false.

A&W’s argument may be conveniently divided into three phases. In phase one (pp. 322-333/2-15), they discuss the kind of thing the laws of logic are, starting from “the least objectionable observation”, which is that they are truths. Since the primary bearers of truth values are propositions, the laws of logic are propositions. A&W further contend that the laws of logic are necessary truths. Moreover, the laws of logic, although not physical objects, “really exist”; indeed, they exist necessarily (as opposed to contingently).

In phase two (pp. 333-335/15-18), A&W contend that propositions, and hence the laws of logic, are mental entities: in particular they are thoughts (see also p.336/20). I shall dub this reduction of propositions to thoughts the *reduction thesis*.

In phase three (pp. 335-338/18-20), A&W argue that if “the laws of logic are necessarily existent thoughts, they can only be the thoughts of a necessarily existent mind”. From this, it is argued that a “necessarily existent mind must be the mind of a *necessarily existent person*. And this, as Aquinas would say, everyone understands to be God”.

I shall not discuss the sub-arguments that A&W muster in support of their phase-one contentions. I shall confine my attention to phase two and argue that the reduction thesis is untenable. As that thesis is required for phase three, it would follow, if my argument succeeds, that A&W’s conclusion, viz. that the “laws of logic imply the existence of God” (p. 337/20), lacks support.

(2) A quick and easy objection to A&W's argument

The word “thought” is ambiguous (see Crane 2001: 102 and 2013:169): it can mean (1) an episode or act of thinking something (call that a ‘thought-1’) or (2) what is thought about, i.e. the content of the episode or act of thinking (call that a ‘thought-2’). The use of “thought” for the propositional content of acts of thinking is found in the literature (see, e.g., Smith 2011:355) but A&W employ ‘thought’ as a generic term for mental items (p. 334/17) with meaning (1), for they explicitly distinguish thoughts from their contents, thus (p. 336/19-20, note 31, original italics):

.... thoughts belong essentially to the minds that produce them. Your thoughts necessarily belong to you. *We* could not have had *your* thoughts (except in the weaker sense that we could have thoughts *with the same content* as your thoughts, which presupposes a distinction between human thoughts and the content of those thoughts, e.g. propositions).

According to this view any occurrent thought-1 is unique to just one mind. It follows that thoughts-1 are not shareable; they are private. But such is not the case with propositions. When Gottlieb thinks, “Der Himmel ist blau” and Pierre thinks, “Le ciel est bleu”, the respective contents of their thoughts (all things being equal) are constituted by one and the same proposition, expressible by the English token <The sky is blue>. Accordingly, the proposition is shared. Propositions possess a property, shareability², that thoughts-1 do not.

A&W may reply that this objection is *too* quick and easy, for it does not engage with, and hence do not refute, their supporting argument for the contention that propositions are thoughts. If their argument were to succeed, then it would be the intuitions underlying the above objection that would be suspect. Of course, A&W might also contend that I have misconstrued their notion of thoughts when saying that they are thoughts-1. In what follows, however, I shall not rely on the distinction between thoughts-1 and thoughts-2 invoked above.

(3) A&W's argument for the intentionality of propositions

Propositions, say A&W, exhibit the feature of intentionality, “which is best understood as a distinctive mark of mental entities” (p.333/16). Citing Tim Crane (1998a and 1998b), A&W note that intentionality has two characteristics, namely *directedness* and *aspectual shape* (the latter term being attributable to John Searle, 1992:155). A&W characterise directedness – often glossed as *ofness* or *aboutness* in the literature – as meaning that “an intentional entity is *directed* toward something else, namely, whatever it is about” (p.333/16). In A&W's example, the statement “Tokyo is the capital city of Japan” is directed to Tokyo (and also Japan, for an intentional entity may be directed to more than one object).

According to A&W, aspectual shape “can be thought of as the particular *way* the object is apprehended” (p.333/16). In A&W's example, the two statements

“Mark Twain wrote *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*” and “Samuel Clemens wrote *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*” are directed to the same object, the man named Samuel Clemens who adopted the pen name ‘Mark Twain’, but are directed to that man in different ways. The sentences, as it were, “reflect different *perspectives* on their object”. For A&W (p. 334/17), these sentences “assert the same fact by means of two different propositions”.

A&W continue: “So propositions, construed as primary truth-bearers, are *intrinsically intentional*; they possess both directedness and aspectual shape” (p. 334 /17). This strikes me as a *non sequitur*: the appeal to directedness and aspectual shape may warrant the ascription ‘intentional’ but A&W at this point have not explained what warrants the ascription ‘*intrinsically intentional*’. I shall revisit this matter.

In virtue of their intentionality, mental items are distinguished from non-mental items. Propositions, in common with such uncontroversially mental items as beliefs, desires, hopes and fears, have directedness and aspectual shape. Indeed, it is in virtue of their intentionality that propositions can function as truth-bearers: if a proposition were not about something one could not ascribe a truth-value to it. Non-mental items such as rocks, clouds, flutes and electrons do not exhibit intentionality in the technical sense in play here: they simply are not *about* anything.

A&W then consider into what ontological category propositions should be placed and offer two options: either (1) they fall into the class of essentially mental items or (2) they should be placed in a separate class of “*intentional but non-mental*” items (pp.334-335 /18). The contention is that option (1) is simpler and less arbitrary: propositions exhibit the distinctive mark of the mental, whereas option (2) requires the “positing [of] a *sui generis* ontological category”. A&W suggest that option (1) is almost demanded by the principle of parsimony. Hence, being propositions, “the laws of logic are mental in nature. The laws of logic are *thoughts*” (p.335/18).

(4) A preliminary critique of the reduction thesis

Bill Vallicella (2013) contends that “the principle of parsimony is too frail a reed with which to support the reduction of propositions to thoughts”. He comments that a simpler ontology is preferable to a more complex ontology only if the simpler one explains all the data that are explained by the complex one, and A&W have not shown that their single-class ontology of intentional items is explanatorily adequate. Vallicella does not elaborate on this point, which merely attributes to A&W a sin of omission. My objection is different but to justify it I need to examine further the notion of intentionality.

That intentionality is the mark of the mental is commonly referred to as Brentano’s Thesis: Crane (1998b: 229) quotes Brentano as asserting that intentionality “is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena” (1995: 89). This thesis may be interpreted as requiring (a) that all mental phenomena exhibit intentionality, in other

words, intentionality is *necessary* for mentality; and (b) that only mental phenomena exhibit intentionality, that is to say, intentionality is *sufficient* for mentality. A&W state that their argument “requires only that intentionality be a sufficient condition of the mental [it] is unaffected if it turns out that there are some non-intentional mental states” (p. 334/17: note 28). It is debateable whether the necessity condition (a) of Brentano’s Thesis is falsified by such sensations as pains and itches, which seem to lack directedness towards any object, or (see Searle 1983:1) even by certain moods and emotions, but I shall concentrate on the sufficiency condition (b), so crucial to A&W’s argument.

Crane suggests that putative examples of non-mental phenomena that exhibit intentionality “are more controversial [*sc.* than examples of mental phenomena lacking intentionality], but we find phenomena such as the disposition of plants to move towards the source of light offered as primitive non-mental forms of intentionality” (1998b:230-231). However, is it really controversial to attribute intentionality to pictorial representations such as photographs, paintings or maps? Surely, Turner’s masterpiece *The Fighting Temeraire* is *about* that warship and, moreover, shows a *particular aspect* of it (being towed towards the viewer, away from the setting sun). Yet the painting, in contrast to the viewer’s visual perception of it, is not a mental state: it is a concrete object. Even a road-traffic sign is directed to, or is about, something, typically the road ahead, and represents a particular aspect of it, perhaps that it narrows or has a steep gradient.

Anders Nes (2008) has argued that even a state of attraction is directed to some object or other, that is to say whatever answers the question, “What is attracted, in this state of attraction?” Furthermore, the attracted object will be attracted under a particular aspect, depending on the nature of the attractive force, e.g. as having mass or as having an electrical charge or as being magnetic (for the cases, respectively, of gravitational, electrical or magnetic attraction). Thus, “a simple-minded but natural reading” (Nes’s phrase) of the requirements of intentionality does not exclude some non-mental phenomena.

Now if pictorial objects (such as photographs) and dispositional states (such as states of attraction) are genuinely intentional, then, being plainly non-mental, they will be genuine counter-examples to the sufficiency condition (b) of Brentano’s Thesis, which will thereby be rendered false. If A&W were relying on the thesis that *mere* intentionality is sufficient for mentality, their argument that propositions are mental items would accordingly fail. However, as we shall see, A&W are relying on an augmented thesis.

Alexander Bozzo (2012) has raised the following objection. He interprets A&W’s argument as turning on the premiss: “Something is intrinsically intentional only if it is mental (i.e. is a thought)”. Bozzo refers to Fred Dretske’s suggestion that certain natural and artificial indicators, such as tracks in the snow, compasses, a tree’s rings, bird songs, fingerprints and thermometers, are intentional³. A compass indicates or points to magnetic north, and thus seems to possess the *aboutness*

characteristic of intentionality. But such indicators are not mental, and thus the said premiss is false. However, this seems to me a trifle hasty: although Dretske's indicators may be intentional, A&W would doubtless deny that they are *intrinsically* intentional.

(5) Can the sufficiency condition be salvaged without excluding propositions?

A&W (p. 334/17) in fact acknowledge that some non-mental items exhibit intentionality of a kind: they mention, as an example, that the physical marks on a printed page can be said to be about something. However, it is asserted that any such intentionality is merely *derivative*, for it depends on the prior activity of a mind. In the absence of a mind to confer meaning on them, no physical structures could be said to be about anything. A&W would therefore not regard linguistic entities (e.g. uttered or inscribed assertoric sentences and *a fortiori* newspaper articles and books), pictorial representations (e.g. photographs and paintings) and Dretske's indicators as counterexamples to the reduction thesis, on the ground that they are not intrinsically intentional. Thus, A&W's reduction thesis actually relies on the sufficiency of *intrinsic* intentionality (as against unqualified intentionality) for mentality. However, directedness and aspectual shape are not enough to confer intrinsic intentionality (those features are, after all, exhibited by Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire*): A&W seem also to be relying on an intuitive notion of mind to augment the features of directedness and aspectual shape.

Nonetheless, this puts A&W in very good company. Crane (1998b: 247) acknowledges that "some philosophers take a view of intentionality which makes it unproblematically a feature of many non-mental things", but stresses that, as with the concept of consciousness, the concept of intentionality is one that we use in elucidating what it is for a creature to have a mind: a criterion that counts as intentional any phenomena that are clearly not mental is to be rejected (Crane 1998b: 249). Crane denies that this is a circular way to proceed because we "already have a grasp on the concept of a mind": we use the concept when we consider, for instance, that we have a "perspective on the world", or that "there is something that it is like to be conscious".

Of course, and as Nes (2008) comments, if what it is for something to have intentionality is articulated in explicitly mental terms, then intentionality is only trivially sufficient for mentality. However, it will not do to dismiss A&W's reduction of propositions to thoughts merely by asserting that propositions are clearly not mental, for that would beg the question against their argument. Hence, we need to investigate whether it is possible to adjudicate between A&W's intuition that propositions are mental items and the counter-intuition that they are not.

(6) Resolving the clash of intuitions

Crane in his response (2008) to Nes contends that a report of an intentional state will “describe *the way* the subject is representing the world” (my emphasis) and that it “is the notion of representation that will distinguish intentionality from the other phenomena that Nes talks about”. This prompts the thought that differences in the way representation comes about may indicate a difference between the intrinsic or original intentionality proper to mentality and the derivative intentionality ascribable to non-mental entities. Consider, by way of example, the rings in a tree trunk representing the age of the tree to a botanist⁴. The botanist can entertain this representation (call it a second-order representation) only because he or she has a separate and logically prior mental representation (call it a first-order representation) of the ring structure. The second-order representation counts as a representation of the tree’s age derivatively; it could not do so in the absence of the first-order representation. The first-order representation is intrinsic, in the sense that it represents what it does represent without the need for the subject to have a numerically distinct representation. The mental state that is the visual perception of the tree rings will represent the rings to the perceiving subject even in the absence of a representation of the tree’s age (as in the case when the subject is ignorant of dating by tree rings) but the converse does not hold.

With this distinction in representations, A&W’s assertion that a proposition is intrinsically intentional no longer seems tenable. Unless and until a proposition is made manifest in such a way as to render it capable of being apprehended by a subject, there is nothing for a subject mentally to grasp. As A&W themselves accept (p. 323/3), a proposition is articulated and communicated – made manifest, as it were - only by means of a linguistic token, e.g. an uttered or an inscribed sentence: however, a subject cannot attribute an intentional content to the proposition so expressed (i.e. cannot entertain the second-order representation conveyed by the proposition) unless he or she has a mental representation (which will be the first-order representation) of the linguistic token itself. I cannot apprehend that the proposition <Venus is the brightest planet in the night sky> is about Venus and presents it under a particular aspect (i.e. in terms of its brightness) unless I have a first-order mental representation of a sentence expressing that proposition.

(7) Conclusion

The upshot of Section 6 is that the intentionality of a proposition is merely derivative: it depends upon a mind that has a logically prior first-order representation of the proposition (or rather, of a linguistic token expressing the proposition). Since this means that propositions join, for instance, books, newspaper articles, paintings and photographs in the class of *derivatively* intentional entities, and hence do not form a *sui generis* class, it follows that A&W’s appeal to parsimony fails. Perhaps more importantly, it also follows that, as A&W rely on the sufficiency of *intrinsic* intentionality for mentality, they have no grounds for ascribing mentality to

propositions. Their reduction of propositions to thoughts accordingly fails and, as the reduction thesis supplies an essential premiss for their phase-three argument to the existence of God, that argument lapses.

Notes

1. Page references for Anderson & Welty's paper are given as journal article/online preprint. Italics in quotations are in the original unless otherwise stated.
2. McGrath (2012) characterises propositions as "the sharable objects of the attitudes and the primary bearers of truth and falsity".
3. Bozzo's brief article lacks a reference but Dretske's observations are to be found in Dretske (2002: 493).
4. Kriegel's discussion of the intrinsic subjectivity of intentional states (2013a:11) informs my discussion here, though I have exchanged his labels "first-order" and "second-order".

References

Anderson, James N. and Greg Welty, 2011, "The Lord of Non-Contradiction: An Argument for God from Logic", *Philosophia Christi*, 13:2 (2011), 321-338. A preprint has been published on Anderson's website (accessed 25.06.2013), URL = http://www.proginosko.com/docs/The_Lord_of_Non-Contradiction.pdf

Bayne, Tim and Michelle Montague (editors), *Cognitive Phenomenology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2011).

Bozzo, Alexander, 2012, "Transcendental Arguments for God's Existence: Anderson and Welty", posted on the "Gratuitous Ruminations" website on 6 March 2012, URL (accessed 25.06.2013) = <http://gratuitousruminations.wordpress.com/2012/03/06/transcendental-arguments-for-gods-existence-anderson-and-welty/>

Brentano, Franz, 1995, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, English edition (L. McAlister, ed.), London: Routledge. This work was originally published in 1874.

Chalmers, David J., 2002, *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crane, Tim, 1998a, "Intentionality", in Craig, Edward (editor), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, London: Routledge (1998).

Crane, Tim, 1998b, "Intentionality as the Mark of the Mental", in O'Hear, Anthony (editor), *Current Issues in the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1998), pp. 229-251.

Crane, Tim, 2001, *Elements of Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crane, Tim, 2008, "Reply to Nes", *Analysis*, 68.3 (July 2008), 215-218.

Crane, Tim, 2013, "Unconscious Belief and Conscious Thought", in Kriegel, 2013b, pp. 156-173.

Dretske, Fred, 2002, "A Recipe for Thought", as printed in Chalmers, pp. 491-499. This is a slightly revised version of the paper entitled "If You Can't Make One, You Don't Know How It Works", in French, P., T. Uehling and H. Wettstein (eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 19 (1994), pp. 468-482.

Jacob, Pierre 2010, "Intentionality", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/intentionality/>.

Kriegel, Uriah, 2013a, "The Phenomenal Intentionality Research Program", in Kriegel 2013b, pp.1-26.

Kriegel, Uriah (editor), 2013b, *Phenomenal Intentionality*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

McGrath, Matthew, 2012, "Propositions", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/propositions/>.

Nes, Anders, 2008, "Are only mental states intentional?", *Analysis* 68:3 (July 2008), 205-215.

Searle, John R., 1983, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, John R., 1992, *The Rediscovery of Mind*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Smith, David Woodruff, 2011, "The Phenomenology of Consciously Thinking", in Bayne and Montague, pp. 345 -372.

Vallicella, Bill, 2013, "From the Laws of Logic to the Existence of God", posted on the "Maverick Philosopher" website on 18 May 2013, URL (accessed 09.06.2013) = http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/intentionality/

