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THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT AND RUSSELL'S ANTINOMY

Abstract. In this short note we respond to the claim made by Christopher Viger in [4] that Anselm's so-called ontological argument falls prey to Russell's paradox. We show that Viger's argument is based on a flawed premise and hence does not in fact demonstrate what he claims it demonstrates.

Keywords: ontological argument, Russell's paradox, St. Anselm.

In this short note we respond to the claim made by Christopher Viger in [4] that Anselm's so-called ontological argument falls prey to Russell's paradox. We show that Viger's argument is based on a flawed premise and hence does not in fact demonstrate what he claims it demonstrates.

We know of three earlier papers [3, 2, 1] which have responded to Viger's argument by attempting to point out where the flaw is. Each author identifies the problems in Viger's argument at a fairly high level, in the necessity of defining the domain of discourse $\mathbb{D}$ in advance of running Viger's argument and the distinction between sentential negation and relation negation; the nature of relations and their definitions; and the difference between the intension and extension of proper classes, respectively. (Interestingly, neither Scheffler nor Nowicki seem concerned with

the objection that Viger says people may advance, namely that there's
something fishy about introducing sets into the argument; Neuhaus dis-
cusses the issue but does not find it to be an objection.) Instead, we find
that the flaw occurs at a much more basic level.

We present Viger's argument by quoting directly from his paper,
rather than paraphrasing it as both Scheffler, Nowicki, and Neuhaus
have, to be sure we are responding to the argument he actually makes,
rather than a similar one (however, we omit the justification he gives
for the premises). We begin from two suppositions: that "there is a
'greater than' relation of the kind Anselm imagines" and that "minimally,
Anselm's 'greater than' relation must between God and all things that
are not God." From there, Viger reasons as follows [4, pp. 124–125]:

1. "Let Ω be the set of things that God is greater than."
2. "Let **U** be the set consisting of everything in Ω together with God."
3. "Consider a set $\mathbb{R}$, which contains anything in **U** that does not contain
   itself."
4. "Either $\mathbb{R}$ is God or $\mathbb{R}$ is not God."
5. "If $\mathbb{R}$ is God, then $\mathbb{R}$ is in **U**."
6. "If $\mathbb{R}$ is not God . . . , then $\mathbb{R}$ is in Ω . . . . And since everything in Ω is
   also in **U**, $\mathbb{R}$ is in **U**."
7. "From this result Russell's Paradox follows; any answer to the question
   of whether $\mathbb{R}$ contains itself leads to a contradiction. If $\mathbb{R}$ contains
   itself, then by definition it must be a member of **U** that does not
   contain itself. If $\mathbb{R}$ does not contain itself, then it is something in **U**
   that does not contain itself and so is in $\mathbb{R}$ by definition."

Viger is right when he notes that if Ω is a set, then **U** is also a set,
since the union of a set with a single element will always also be a set.
However, his error comes when he concludes:

> Since we are assuming throughout that the notion of 'God' is not
> problematic, **U** would be a set if Ω were. So Ω is not a set. *Thus,*
> *the defining property of Ω must be self-contradictory, otherwise its*
> *extension, and hence set membership, would be well-defined.*
>   [4, p. 125, emphasis added]

It is the final sentence that contains the flaw in his argument. The final
sentence is essentially the assertion that every set-defining property is

either self-contradictory or is well-defined. On the basis of this assertion and an argument similar to the one that Viger gave, one would expect Viger to also conclude that set-defining properties such as $x \in x$ and $x \notin x$ are also self-contradictory. But the properties $x \in x$ and $x \notin x$ are *prima facie* consistent. They are only inconsistent when we also assume that a universal set $\mathbb{D}$ exists ([3, p. 4], [2, p. 359], and [1, p. 675] make this point but do not, in my opinion, realize the importance of it, or the fact that once it is noted, nothing further is needed to block the argument), or, to put it another way, if we assume that the domain of discourse is a set, rather than a proper class. Viger never makes explicit what his domain of discourse, much less whether it is a class or a set. As a result, all that he has shown is that if you define greatness in the way that he has, then *either* the domain of discourse is not a set $\mathbb{D}$ (for if it was, then $\mathbb{D}\backslash\text{God}$ would also be a set, and $\mathbb{D}\backslash\text{God} = \Omega$) *or* the definition of greatness that Viger thinks Anselm uses is inconsistent. We are then in a position to make a decision between which of the disjuncts we think is the case. Viger has not given us any independent argument to reject his formulation of Anselm's definition of greatness. We do have, however, an independent argument against the existence of a universal set, namely, Russell's paradox itself. Lacking any independent argument for the truth of the second disjunct, we have better reason to conclude that all Viger has done is given another argument in favor of the truth of the first disjunct. And if $\mathbb{D}$ is not a set, then Viger's argument falls at the first hurdle, since he gives us no justification to believe that the set Ω is in fact a *set*.

References

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