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LUCEY'S AGNOSTICISM: THE BELIEVER'S REPLY

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In "An Agnostic Argument" Kenneth Lucey has presented an apparent *antinomy* concerning the truth-value of the proposition *that God exists*, arguing that "there is justification for claiming that one ought to both refrain from believing that God exists and refrain from believing that God does not exist."¹ Because of the particular view of logical implication that Lucey adopts, however, there is a convenient strategy that the anti-agnostic can utilize in deflating this antinomy.

Lucey's argument proceeds from two premises that have received wide acceptance in the current theistic debate:

- (1) If God exists then it is necessarily true that God exists.
- (2) If God does not exist then it is necessarily true that God does not exist.

He then advances two further claims;

- (3) that God exists does not logically imply that man has landed on Uranus,
- and (4) that man has landed on the moon does not logically imply that God exists,

both of which, he claims, are grounded upon "ordinary intuitions" about what is and is not logically implied by a proposition such as *that God exists*. It is important to understand that, for Lucey, logical implication (entailment) is construed as "C.I. Lewis' strict implication, or the necessity of the conditional." As such, he is able to derive from (1) and (4) the proposition *that God does not exist* by standardly accepted modal principles, and, by a strictly analogous proof, from (2) and (3) the proposition *that God exists*. Assuming that both arguments are equally plausible we arrive at an antinomy.

The validity of Lucey's inferences is dependent upon certain properties of the strict conditional and modal operators. First, if logical implication is expressed by the strict conditional '→' then since $\sim(A \rightarrow B) \rightarrow \sim \Box(A \supset B)$ and $\sim \Box(A \supset B) \rightarrow \Diamond(A \& \sim B)$ it follows from (4) that

- (5) it is possible that both man has landed on the moon and God does not exist.

A move of this sort would not be permitted on certain other construals of logical implication, for instance, that preferred by the relevance logicians where $\sim(A \rightarrow B) \rightarrow \sim\Box(A \supset B)$ is not sanctioned if ‘ \rightarrow ’ expresses the relevance conditional.² It is plain, therefore, that such an interpretation of (3) and (4) cannot be adopted by Lucey. Second, the use of (1) with (5) to derive the atheistic conclusion requires that the modal terms in both statements express the *same type* of modality. That is, if the modality in (5) is that of *logical* possibility, as it presumably is, then the necessity in (1) must be logical necessity, otherwise Lucey would not be able to use *modus ponens* as he does in arriving at his conclusion *that God does not exist*. Similarly, if the modality in (1) is of another variety the same would have to hold for the modality in (5). But since we are speaking of *logical* implication in (4) we are bound to view the modality in (5) and, thus, in (1), as logical.

By excluded middle we can assume that at least one of the following holds:

- (6) God exists.
 (7) God does not exist.

So, by (1) and (2), the same can be said of the pair:

- (8) *That God exists* is (logically) necessarily true.
 (9) *That God does not exist* is (logically) necessarily true.

Now if either (8) or (9) is true and logical implication is expressed by the strict conditional then not both (3) and (4) are true. For if (8) is true then (4) is false, since a (logically) necessary truth is logically implied by any other proposition; so the atheistic argument is unsound. On the other hand, if (9) holds then (3) is false, since *that God exists* would then be a necessary falsehood logically implying every other proposition. Clearly, one of Lucey’s arguments is unsound.

With this Lucey can readily agree; he does not, after all, claim that both (3) and (4) *are* true, only that both are equally grounded upon our intuitions about logical implications. The *antinomy* exists because the premises of the atheistic argument are no more and no less plausible than those of the theistic argument, and the mere fact that one of those arguments is unsound in no way removes the paradox.

The rationally-minded Believer need not be shackled by such reasoning. To establish an antinomy it is not sufficient to construct two equally plausible arguments one of which supports a proposition and the other of which yields its negation. What is essential is that neither the proposition nor its negation can claim superiority with respect to the *sum total of evidence* that can be brought to bear on the issue.³ Thus, if there are independent grounds for either (6) or for (7) then there are grounds for rejecting (3) or for rejecting (4) – despite what our “ordinary intuitions” might be – and these grounds could be appealed to in adjudicating between the two poles of the supposed antinomy. To defend the claim that both

(3) and (4) are equally plausible in light of *all* the evidence available to us would require undermining all other arguments for (6) and for (7), or, more exactly, demonstrating that the evidential support for (6) is precisely equal to that for (7). Patently, Lucey has not done this; he has not shown that either (6) or (7) cannot be based upon independent grounds which *outweigh* the intuitions supporting (3) and (4). Accordingly, the theist who accepts (1) may respond by bringing forth his favorite arguments for (6) and, thereby, for (8) and the denial of (4), while the atheist who endorses (2) can appeal to his reasons for (7), hence, for (9) and the denial of (3). Both have the means to bounce the ball back into the agnostic's court and, for the meantime, rest assured that they have swept away this particular threat of antinomy.⁴

It is precisely Lucey's understanding of logical implication that paves the way for this reply to his argument. Alternatively, one could attempt to base (3) and (4) upon other theoretical views concerning logical implication, logical truth or logical necessity. Indeed, the relevance logician can readily defend both (3) and (4) on the grounds that there is a conspicuous lack of relevance between the antecedents and consequents of the negated entailments. But the appeal to relevance, as already indicated, is not available to one who supports the inference patterns underlying Lucey's reasoning. Perhaps some other gambit could be invoked, e.g., intuitionism, in order to avoid acceptance of either (6) or (7). But this could be sustained only by undermining all efforts to constructively prove these propositions, an order that Lucey has not fulfilled. An outright insistence that (3) and (4) are just *obvious* truths about logical implications, finally, must be counterbalanced by the observation that both (1) and (2), and for that matter (8) and (9), are *not* obvious as truths of logic – recalling that the modalities contained in these latter statements must be *logical* if Lucey's inferences are valid. The anti-agnostic can be just as stubborn in his appeal to intuitions.

Perhaps there is yet another construal of logical implication which would provide the material needed to preserve the force of this skeptical antinomy. For the present, the Believer – whether theist or atheist – can remain at ease, for Lucey's argument leaves the theistic debate exactly where it found it.

NOTES

1. Kenneth G. Lucey, "An Agnostic Argument," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14, No. 4 (1983), 249–252.
2. See, for example, A.R. Anderson and N.D. Belnap, Jr., *Entailment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). A prominent feature of relevance systems is a denial that $(p \ \& \ \sim p) \rightarrow q$ is a valid form where ' \rightarrow ' expresses entailment (logical implication). Thus, there are propositions A and B such that $\sim((A \ \& \ \sim A) \rightarrow B)$ is true. Because of this, the relevance logicians must deny that $\sim((A \ \& \ \sim A) \rightarrow B)$ logically implies $\diamond((A \ \& \ \sim A) \ \& \ \sim B)$ in order to avoid the undesirable $\diamond(A \ \& \ \sim A)$.
3. Cf., Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Macmillan, 1964), translated by Norman Kemp Smith, where we find: "If thetic be the name for any body of dogmatic

doctrines, antithetic may be taken as meaning, not dogmatic assertions of the opposite, but the conflict of the doctrines of seemingly dogmatic knowledge (*thesis cum antithesi*) in which no one assertion can establish superiority over another” (A420/B448). The modality expressed by ‘can’ here suggests an underlying generalization concerning all available grounds for either side of the antithetic, a point further underscored by Kant when he writes that the opposition constituting an antinomy is “but a natural and unavoidable illusion, which even after it has ceased to beguile still continues to delude though not to deceive us, and which though thus capable of being rendered harmless *can never be eradicated*” (A422/B450, my emphasis). It is not viable, therefore, to erect a would-be antinomy in a vacuum, immune from appeals to our background knowledge.

4. No doubt there are theists who would reject (4) on the grounds that since God is the ultimate cause or ground of all else then any truth would imply – even logically imply – the proposition *that God exists*. For an alternative point of view I refer the reader to my “Can God Make Up His Mind?,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15 (1984), 37–47, in which reasons are advanced for (7).