

By N. M. L. NATHAN

IN his *Philosophical Theology* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2nd edn, 1980) James F. Ross develops an argument for the existence of an unpreventable and uncausable being. I will call it Argument (A). If sound, (A) proves that there is a being with two traditional attributes of God; as a natural theologian, Ross hopes that nothing in (A) will also force us to conclude either that this being has other attributes which God could not possess, or that it lacks attributes which God would have to possess. Like standard cosmological arguments and arguments from design, (A) assumes some general principles about explanation. But it differs from these arguments in that the principles about explanation which it assumes do not entail that there actually is a cause or explanation for anything but only that it is possible that certain things have explanations. Ross rejects pancausalism and the principle of sufficient reason and approvingly quotes Duns Scotus: 'I prefer to submit conclusions and premisses about the possible, for if those about the actual are conceded, those about the possible are conceded, but not conversely ...' (*De Primo Principio*, Ch. III; quoted *PT* p. 181, n. 34). I will try to show, however, that even if Ross's rather plausible principles about explanation are true, (A) runs into difficulties. And I will try to show that although a modified version of (A) would establish the existence of an unpreventable being, Ross's principles about explanation would themselves oblige us to deny that this being is uncausable, and thus deprive even the existence of an unpreventable being of any theological significance.

(A) runs as follows (I abbreviate Ross's own version, given on *PT* p. 174).

- (1) If a proposition is false, then it is possible that there is an explanation of its falsity.
- (2) All explanations of a proposition's falsity are either internal (in terms of the inconsistency of the proposition) or external (in terms of something's preventing the proposition from being true).
- (3) 'There is an unpreventable and uncausable being' is consistent.
- (4) It is impossible that anything should prevent the existence of an unpreventable and uncausable being.
- (5) If 'There is an unpreventable and uncausable being' is false, it is impossible for its falsity to have an internal explanation. [From (3)]
- (6) If 'There is an unpreventable and uncausable being' is false, it is impossible for its falsity to have an external explanation. [From (4)]

- (7) If 'There is an unpreventable and uncausable being' is false, it is impossible for its falsity to have an explanation. [From (2), (5) and (6)]
- (8) There is an unpreventable and uncausable being. [From (1) and (7)]

A natural objection is that (4) is false as it stands. Nothing can prevent the existence of an unpreventable being, but why should not something prevent an unpreventable being from also being uncausable? To meet this, we replace 'unpreventable and uncausable', in (4), and throughout (A), by 'unpreventable and unpreventably uncausable' and call the resulting argument (B). But even (B) is open to a radical objection. Consider this parallel argument, which I will call (C).

- (1) If a proposition is false, then it is possible that there is an explanation of its falsity.
- (2) All explanations of a proposition's falsity are either internal (in terms of the inconsistency of the proposition) or external (in terms of something's preventing the proposition from being true).
- (3c) 'There is no unpreventable and unpreventably uncausable being' is consistent.
- (4c) It is impossible that anything should cause the existence of an unpreventable and unpreventably uncausable being.
- (5c) If 'There is no unpreventable and unpreventably uncausable being' is false, it is impossible for its falsity to have an internal explanation. [From (3c)]
- (6c) If 'There is no unpreventable and unpreventably uncausable being' is false, it is impossible for its falsity to have an external explanation. [From (4c)]
- (7c) If 'There is no unpreventable and unpreventably uncausable being' is false, it is impossible for its falsity to have an explanation. [From (2), (5c) and (6c)]
- (8c) There is no unpreventable and unpreventably uncausable being. [From (1) and (7c)]

Since (B) and (C) have contradictory conclusions, we cannot accept that (B) is sound without denying the soundness of (C). But it seems impossible to find good grounds for preferring either one of these two arguments to the other. If we accept that one of the arguments is sound then we accept all its premisses as well as its logical validity, and if we deny the soundness of the other then either we deny its logical validity or we deny at least one of its premisses. But both arguments are logically valid, so to prefer one argument we must accept all its premisses and reject at least one premiss of the other argument. Suppose we initially accept (B). Which premiss of (C) can we reject? We cannot reject either (1) or (2), since these are

also premisses of (B). (4c) seems analytically true. This leaves only (3c). But (3c) is no less plausible than

(3b) 'There is an unpreventable and unpreventably uncausable being' is consistent,

which is again a premiss of (B). In the same way, if we initially accept (C), the only premisses of (B) which are not also premisses of (C) itself are

(4b) It is impossible that anything should prevent the existence of an unpreventable and unpreventably uncausable being,

which again seems analytically true, and (3b), which is no less plausible than (3c). The parallelism seems to deprive both arguments of any cogency.

Can anything be salvaged from (B) on the assumption that (3c) is no less plausible than (3b)? Consider the argument we get if, throughout (B), we replace 'unpreventable and unpreventably uncausable being' by 'unpreventable being'. I will call it (D). If sound, (D) shows that there is an unpreventable being. Obviously (D) is logically valid. Can it be neutralized, like (B), by a parallel argument for the contradictory conclusion? If we try to construct such a parallel, (E), by substituting 'unpreventable being' for 'unpreventable and unpreventably uncausable being' throughout (C), then (4c) would be replaced by

(4e) It is impossible that anything should cause the existence of an unpreventable being.

But (4e) is false. So (D) seems to stand. And although its conclusion is less interesting, from the point of view of natural theology, than the conclusion of either (A) or (B), the natural theologian could at least insist that there is nothing in (D) which is actually inconsistent with the existence of a being which is uncausable as well as unpreventable.

And yet I think that anyone who accepts Ross's principles about explanation will in the end find it difficult to accept that any being is uncausable. If we accept

(1) If a proposition is false, then it is possible that there is an explanation of its falsity

then surely we should also accept

(1a) If a proposition is true, then it is possible that there is an explanation of its truth.

And if we accept

(2) All explanations of a proposition's falsity are either internal (in terms of the inconsistency of the proposition) or external (in terms of something's preventing the proposition from being true)

then surely we should also accept

(2a) All explanations of a proposition's truth are either internal (in terms of the inconsistency of the proposition's negation) or external (in terms of something's causing the proposition to be true).

But then we have the following argument, which I call (F).

- (1a) If a proposition is true, then it is possible that there is an explanation of its truth.
- (2a) All explanations of a proposition's truth are either internal (in terms of the inconsistency of the proposition's negation) or external (in terms of something's causing the proposition to be true).
- (3f) 'There is no uncausable being' is consistent.
- (4f) It is impossible that anything should cause the existence of an uncausable being.
- (5f) If 'There is an uncausable being' is true, it is impossible for its truth to have an internal explanation. [From (3f)]
- (6f) If 'There is an uncausable being' is true, it is impossible for its truth to have an external explanation. [From (4f)]
- (7f) If 'There is an uncausable being' is true, it is impossible for its truth to have an explanation. [From (2a), (5f) and (6f)]
- (8f) There is no uncausable being. [From (1a) and (7f)]

It is of course true that (F) is mirrored by an argument, (G), for the conclusion that there is an uncausable being: (3f) is replaced, in (G), by

(3g) 'There is an uncausable being' is consistent

and (4f) is replaced by

(4g) It is impossible that anything should cause it to be true that there is no uncausable being.

But (4g) is false. To cause it to be true that something does not exist is the same as to prevent its existence. There is nothing in the argument which excludes the possibility that if there were any uncausable beings at least one would be preventable.

If (F) survives the parallelism objection, can it be rejected on other grounds? Ross himself defends a Scotist argument for the existence of an uncausable being (see *PT* pp. 176-80), and if this argument were sound we would have to reject at least one premiss of (F). But in fact the Scotist argument also suggests an equally plausible parallel argument for the conclusion that there is not even an unpreventable being. With 'x is potential' defined as "'x exists' is logically possible but x is not actual', the Scotist argument can be put like this:

That there is at least one Uncausable Producer is logically possible.

Whatever is logically possible is either actual or potential.

Whatever is potential is causable.

That there is an Uncausable Producer is not causable.

Hence, that there is an Uncausable Producer is not potential.

Therefore, at least one Uncausable Producer is actual, that is, exists.

The difficulty is that we could equally well argue as follows:

That there is no unpreventable being is logically possible.

Whatever is logically possible is either actual or potential.

Whatever is potential is causable.

That there is no unpreventable being is not causable.

Hence, that there is no unpreventable being is not potential.

Therefore, that there is no unpreventable being is actual, that is, no unpreventable being exists.

If we use the Scotist argument to criticize (F), we can hardly continue to defend even (D). And of course we can continue to defend (D) without being committed to the Scotist principle that whatever is potential is causable. (D) assumes only that whatever is potential is preventable.

I conclude then that Ross's argument (A) breaks down, and that although (D), which is a modified version of (A), may still establish the existence of an unpreventable being, this will not help the natural theologian, because premisses common to (A) and (D) ultimately commit us to the conclusion that this unpreventable being is causable.

School of Economic and Social Studies, © N. M. L. NATHAN 1988
University of East Anglia,
Norwich NR4 7TJ