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KANT'S OBJECTION TO THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT*

THE Ontological Argument for the existence of God has fascinated and puzzled philosophers ever since it was first formulated by St. Anselm. I suppose most philosophers have been inclined to reject the argument, although it has an illustrious line of defenders extending to the present and presently terminating in Professors Malcolm and Hartshorne. Many philosophers have tried to give *general* refutations of the argument—refutations designed to show that no version of it can possibly succeed—of which the most important is, perhaps, Kant's objection, with its several contemporary variations. I believe that none of these general refutations are successful; in what follows I shall support this belief by critically examining Kant's objection.

Anselm's argument, it seems to me, is best construed as a *reductio ad absurdum*. Let us use the term 'God' as an abbreviation for 'the being than which none greater can be conceived'. The argument then proceeds (in Anselm's own terms as much as possible) as follows:

- (1) God exists in the understanding but not in reality.
(assumption for *reductio*)
- (2) Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone. (premise)
- (3) A being having all of God's properties plus existence in reality can be conceived. (premise)
- (4) A being having all of God's properties plus existence in reality is greater than God. (from 1 and 2)
- (5) A being greater than God can be conceived. (3, 4)
- (6) It is false that a being greater than God can be conceived.
(by definition of 'God')
- (7) Hence, it is false that God exists in the understanding but not in reality. (1-6 *reductio ad absurdum*)

And so, if God exists in the understanding, he also exists in reality; but clearly enough he does exist in the understanding (as even the fool will testify); accordingly, he exists in reality as well.

* To be presented in an APA Symposium of the same title, December 28, 1966.

A couple of preliminary comments: to say that a state of affairs is conceivable is to say that there is no logical impossibility in the supposition that it obtains. And to say specifically that a being having all of God's properties plus existence in reality is conceivable, is simply to say that it is possible that there is a being having all of God's properties plus existence in reality—i.e., it is possible that God exists. To say that a being greater than God can be conceived, on the other hand, is to say that it is possible that there exist a being greater than the being than which it is not possible that there exist a greater—which certainly seems unlikely. We should note further that premise 2 of the argument is susceptible of several interpretations, each yielding a different version of the argument. For example, it may be taken as 2a:

(2a) If x exists and y does not, then x is greater than y .

It can also be taken as a weaker claim. Suppose we select some properties—call them " g -properties"—whose possession makes for greatness. Then we might read 2 as

(2b) If x has every g -property y has, and x exists and y does not, then x is greater than y .¹

And of course there are many other possible interpretations.

The most famous attack upon the Ontological Argument is contained in a few pages of the *Critique of Pure Reason*—an attack which many think conclusive. The heart of Kant's objection is contained in the following passage:

"*Being*" is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations, as existing in themselves. Logically, it is merely the copula of a judgment. The proposition "God is omnipotent" contains two concepts, each of which has its object—God and omnipotence. The small word "is" adds no new predicate, but only serves to posit the predicate *in its relation* to the subject. If, now, we take the subject (God) with all its predicates (among which is omnipotence), and say "God is," or "There is a God," we attach no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates, and indeed, posit it as an *object* that stands in relation to my *concept*. The content of both must be one and the same; nothing can have been added to the concept, which expresses merely what is possible, by my thinking its object (through the expression "it is") as given absolutely. Otherwise stated, the real contains no more than the merely possible. A hundred real thalers do not contain the least coin more than a hundred possible thalers. For as the latter signify the concept and the former the object and the positing of the concept, should the former contain more than the latter, my concept would not, in that case, express the whole object, and would not therefore be an adequate concept of it. My financial position, however, is affected very differently by a hundred real thalers than it is by the mere concept of them (that is, of their

¹ This version of 2 was suggested to me by Peter De Vos.

possibility). For the object, as it actually exists, is ton analytically contained in my concept, but is added to my concept (which is a determination of my state) synthetically; and yet the conceived hundred thalers are not themselves in the least increased through thus acquiring existence outside my concept.

By whatever and by however many predicates we may think a thing—even if we completely determine it—we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing *is*. Otherwise it would not be exactly the same thing that exists, but something more than we had thought in the concept: and we could not, therefore, say that the exact object of my concept exists. If we think in a thing every feature of reality except one, the missing reality is not added by my saying that this defective thing exists.²

How, exactly, is what Kant says here relevant to Anselm's Ontological Argument? And how are we to understand what he says? The point of the passage seems to be that being or existence is not a real predicate; Kant apparently thinks this follows from (or is equivalent to) what he puts variously as "the real *contains* no more than the merely possible," "the *content* of both (i.e., concept and object) must be one and the same," "being is not the concept of something that could be *added to* the concept of a thing," etc. An adequate concept, Kant believes, must contain as much content as the thing of which it is the concept; the content of the concept of a thing remains the same whether the thing exists or not; and the existence of the object of a concept is not part of the content of that concept. But what *is* the content of a concept, or of an object? In what way do objects and concepts have content? Kant gives us very little help, in the passage under consideration, in understanding what it is to *add something* to a concept, what it means to say that a concept *contains* as much as an object, or what it is for a concept and its object both to have *content*—the *same* content.

Perhaps what he means is something like this: the content of a concept is the set of properties a thing must have to fall under or be an instance of that concept. The content of the concept *crevasse*, for example, includes, among others, the properties of *occurring on or in glaciers*, and *being more than one foot deep*. The content of the concept *the tallest man in Boston*, will include, among others, the properties of *being a man*, *being in Boston*, and *being taller than any other man in Boston*. The content of an *object*, on the other hand, is the set of properties that object has; and a thing *a* has (at least) *as much content as* or *contains as much as* a thing *b* if every member of *b*'s content is a member of *a*'s content. But here we immediately encounter difficulty. For of course it will not be true that the concept of an object contains as much content as the object itself. Consider, for example, the concept *horse*. Any real horse will have many properties not contained in that concept; any real horse will

² Kemp Smith translation (London: Macmillan, 1929), pp. 504-505.

be either more than 16 hands high or else 16 hands or less. But neither of these properties is in the content of the concept *horse* (although of course the property of being either more than 16 hands high or else 16 hands or less will be). Similarly for the tallest man in Boston: he will have the property of being married or else the property of being unmarried; but neither of these properties is part of the content of the concept *the tallest man in Boston*. This suggestion, therefore, requires amendment.

“By whatever and by however many predicates we may think a thing—even if we completely determine it—we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing *is*.” This sentence provides a clue. We might note that to every object there corresponds its *whole concept*: the concept whose content includes all (and only) the properties the object in question has. And where C is the whole concept of some object O , suppose we say that a *whole concept of O diminished with respect to P* is any concept whose content is a largest subset of the content of C that does not entail³ P —that is, its content is a subset of C that does not entail P , and is such that the addition of any other member of the content of C yields a set that does entail P . Very roughly and inaccurately, a whole concept diminished with respect to P is what remains of the whole concept when P is deleted from its content.

Now suppose we consider a domain D of objects some of which really exist and some of which are merely mythological; among its members we may find, e.g., Pegasus, the Taj Mahal, Lyndon Johnson, Santa Claus, Bucephalos, and King Arthur. Suppose also that we define an existential quantifier over this domain as follows: “ $(\exists x)x$ is pink” is to be read as “some existing member of D is pink.” (If we went on to embed this quantifier in an appropriate lower functional calculus, the result would be what has been called “free logic.”) Suppose, furthermore, that the Taj Mahal is pink; and let C , C^{-E} , and C^{-P} be, respectively, the whole concept of the Taj Mahal, a whole concept of the Taj Mahal diminished with respect to existence, and a whole concept of the Taj Mahal diminished with respect to pinkness. Finally, let Cx , $C^{-E}x$ and $C^{-P}x$, respectively, ascribe to x all the properties in C , C^{-E} , and C^{-P} . Now perhaps Kant means to point out that existence differs from pinkness in the following respect. Evidently there are possible circumstances in which $(\exists x)C^{-P}x$ would be true but $(\exists x)Cx$ false; perhaps these circumstances would obtain if the Taj Mahal were green, for example. But the same does not hold for $(\exists x)C^{-E}x$; it cannot be true unless $(\exists x)Cx$ is too. It is possible

³ Where a set S of properties entails a property P if the proposition that a thing x has P follows from the proposition that x has every property in S .

that a whole concept of the Taj Mahal diminished with respect to pinkness be exemplified by some existing member of D when the whole concept of the Taj Mahal is not. But here existence differs from pinkness; if any whole concept of the Taj Mahal diminished with respect to existence is exemplified, then so is the whole concept. A whole concept diminished with respect to existence, unlike a whole concept diminished with respect to pinkness, is *existentially equivalent* to the corresponding whole concept. And perhaps this fact yields an explanation of the claim that existence is not a real property or predicate; we might say that P is a *real* property or predicate just in case it is false that any whole concept diminished with respect to P is existentially equivalent to the corresponding whole concept (D1). It then turns out that existence, unlike pinkness, is not a real property; it "is not a concept of something that could be added to the concept of a thing."

But here we must consider an objection that runs as follows. It is certainly true that, on the proffered definitions, existence is not a real quality. But that this is so is, given these definitions, a mere triviality that in no significant way distinguishes existence from other properties. To see this, let us return to our domain of objects. We defined a quantifier over this domain in such a way that " $(\exists x)Qx$ " is to mean that some existent member of the domain has Q . We could also define a "quantifier" $(\exists^P x)$ (the quotation marks may serve to mollify the purist) in such a way that ' $(\exists^P x)Qx$ ' is to mean that some *pink* member of the domain has Q . Then, even if no *existent* member of D were pink, it would still be true that $(\exists^P x)$ ($x = \text{Valhalla}$) since, as in well known, the walls of Valhalla are pink. And now we note that $(\exists^P x)C^{-P}x$ can be true if and only if $(\exists^P x)Cx$ is true; we might say that a whole concept diminished with respect to pinkness is *pink-sistentially equivalent* to the corresponding whole concept. Of course the same is not true for a whole concept diminished with respect to existence. There are possible circumstances in which $(\exists^P x)C^{-E}x$ but not $(\exists^P x)Cx$ would hold; these circumstances might have obtained, for example, had the Taj Mahal been the merely mythological dwelling place of some legendary Indian prince. And if we said that P is a real property or predicate just in case it is false that any whole concept diminished with respect to P is pink-sistentially equivalent to the corresponding whole concept (D2), then existence, but not pinkness, would be a real property or predicate.

We might put the charge of triviality as follows. To say, under (D1), that pinkness is a real predicate but existence is not, really comes to saying that the proposition *all existent members of D exist* is necessarily true but *all existent members of D are pink* is not.

This is indeed so; but it seems no more illuminating, in the present context, than the parallel remark that, although *all pink members of D are pink* is necessarily true, *all pink members of D exist* is not.

If we accept this objection, then, Kant's claim begins to look like an insignificant triviality with which Anselm scarcely need concern himself. But should we accept it? Kant is not, it seems to me, entirely without a reply; there is a fairly plausible refinement of his claim that may evade the charge of triviality. For consider any merely mythological creature such as Santa Claus, and ask whether he has the property of wearing a size-ten shoe. The legends and stories say nothing at all about the size of Santa's feet. Does Santa wear a size-10 shoe? There seems no reason for supposing that he does, but also no reason for supposing the contrary. There seems, furthermore, to be no way to investigate the question. And perhaps it is plausible to suggest that it's not merely that we don't *know* whether Santa wears a size-ten shoe—there is nothing to know here. That Santa wears a size-ten shoe is neither true nor false; he has neither the property of wearing a size-ten shoe nor the complement of that property. And, it might be added, here is the crucial difference between any existent and any nonexistent object. Where O is any existent object and P any property, either O has P or O has the complement \bar{P} of P , (and if O 's having P is absurd or necessarily false, as in the case of President Johnson and the property of being a real number, then O has \bar{P}). But if O is a merely fictional object such as Pegasus or Santa Claus, then there is at least one property P such that O has neither P nor \bar{P} ; there is at least one property P such that O has P is neither true nor false.

I know of no very strong arguments either for or against this view. But suppose for the moment that it is true. Then a certain difference between existence and pinkness emerges. First of all, the whole concept of an existing object will be *maximal* in the sense that, for any property P , either P or \bar{P} will be a member of it; since this is false for any whole concept of a nonexistent being, a whole concept of an existent is larger than any whole concept of a nonexistent. To put the same point differently, any consistent maximal concept contains existence. This is not true for pinkness, of course; it is not true that any consistent maximal concept contains pinkness.

Furthermore, a whole concept diminished with respect to existence will be smaller than a whole concept diminished with respect to pinkness. For consider any pair of whole concepts diminished with respect to pinkness and existence respectively: suppose we call them C^{-P} and C^{-E} . The result of adding *non-existence* to C^{-E} is a consistent concept, since it is possible that D

contain an object that has every property in C^{-E} and lacks existence. But this new concept cannot be maximal; for, if it were, then on the doctrine under consideration it would contain existence; since it also contains nonexistence, the result would be inconsistent. So we cannot construct a maximal concept by adding nonexistence to a whole concept diminished with respect to existence. On the other hand, it is possible to show that we *can* construct a maximal concept by adding nonpinkness to some whole concept diminished with respect to pinkness. In this respect, therefore, a whole concept diminished with respect to existence is smaller than one diminished with respect to pinkness.

We could dramatize this difference by redefining 'whole concept diminished with respect to P ' as "set of properties such that (1) it is a largest subset of C that does not entail P , and (2) the addition of \bar{P} to it yields a maximal concept." Then there would be no whole concepts diminished with respect to existence; and then the dictum that existence is not a property could be understood as the claim that what distinguishes existence from a real property such as pinkness is just that there are no whole concepts diminished with respect to existence.

Giving a clear and fairly plausible explanation of the claim that existence is not a real predicate, this interpretation also suggests an interesting respect in which existence may differ from other predicates or properties. Unfortunately, it seems to have no particular bearing on Anselm's argument. For Anselm can certainly agree, so far as his argument is concerned, that existence is not a real predicate in the explained sense. Anselm maintains that the concept *the being than which none greater can be conceived* is necessarily exemplified; that this is so is in no way inconsistent with the suggestion that existence differs in the way just explained from pinkness. Anselm argues that the proposition *God exists* is necessarily true; but neither this claim nor his argument for it entails or presupposes that existence is a predicate in the sense just explained.

Finally I wish to make a desultory gesture (space permits no more) in the direction of another way of understanding Kant's objection. "Being is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something that could be added to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations, as existing in themselves." Conceivably Gottlob Frege means to echo this sentiment when he writes that "Affirmation of existence is in fact nothing but a denial of the number nought. Because existence is a property of concepts [and not of objects]"

the ontological argument for the existence of God breaks down."⁴ Now, in saying that existence is not a property of objects, Frege does not mean to say, of course, that propositions of the form *x exists* are all nonsensical or false. He means rather that any proposition of that form is equivalent to one that predicates *being instantiated* or *having some number other than nought* of a concept. And he means to say further that the second way of putting the matter is more revealing or more "basic" than the first. But how does this bear on Anselm's proof? It seems to show only that an equivalent (and perhaps more "basic") form of the argument may be obtained by replacing every phrase of the form '*x exists*', in the argument, by some such phrase as '*the concept of x is not instantiated*'. Now, if this procedure is to reveal some impropriety in Anselm's argument, then the resulting argument must display some glaring deficiency not apparent in the original. But what sort of deficiency would this be? Possibly Frege thinks that, upon translating the argument in the suggested way, we see the futility of premise 2:

(2) Existence is greater than nonexistence.

Now to function properly in the argument, 2 must be construed along the following lines:

(2a) For any objects *A* and *B*, if *A* exists and *B* does not, then *A* is greater than *B*.

And, given Frege's claim about existence, 2a must be understood as

(2') If the concept of *A* is instantiated and the concept of *B* is not, then *A* is greater than *B*.

Now perhaps Frege's query is as follows: If the concept of *B* is not instantiated, with what are we comparing *A*? There seems to be nothing relevant with which to compare it. If the concept of *B* is not instantiated, then it makes no sense, it may be said, to try to compare an object *A* with *B* with respect to greatness or, indeed, any other property.

C. D. Broad concurs in this suggestion:

(1) No comparison can be made between a non-existent term and anything else except on the hypothesis that it exists and (2) on this hypothesis it is meaningless to compare it with anything in respect of the presence or absence of existence.⁵

But this claim is surely false. One certainly *can* compare, for example, Hamlet with Louis XIV in point of the number of books

⁴ *The Foundation of Arithmetic*, tr. J. L. Austin, rev. ed. (London: Blackwell & Mott, 1953; New York: Harper, TB 534, 1962), p. 65.

⁵ *Religion, Philosophy and Psychical Research* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), p. 181.

written about each. And this comparison need not be hypothetical in Broad's sense; when a man says *more books have been written about Hamlet than about Louis XIV*, he certainly need not commit himself to the supposition that if Hamlet had existed more books would have been written about him than about Louis XIV. (If Hamlet really existed, people might find him something of a bore.) And while it is true that Superman is a comic-book figure much stronger than any actual man, it is probably false that if Superman really existed he would be a comic book figure much stronger than any actual man. Finally, one certainly *can* compare an existent and a nonexistent with respect to existence; to do this is only to point out that the one really exists while the other does not. One of the principal differences between Cerberus and Governor Wallace, for example, is that the latter (for better or worse) really exists.

If we return to our domain D of objects we may see another way of putting this point. We have defined two quantifiers over D : $(\exists x)$ and $(\exists^P x)$. We could define a third, $(\exists x)$, as follows: ' $(\exists x)Qx$ ' is to mean simply that some member of D has Q . And now we may put the present point as follows: Kant, Frege, and Broad (if we have understood them) have confused the first of these quantifiers with the third. It is perhaps excusable to hold that if Louis XIV and Hamlet are to be compared, some appropriate domain must contain them both; $(\exists x)(x = \text{Hamlet})$ and $(\exists x)(x = \text{Louis XIV})$ must both be true. But this does not entail the false claim that $(\exists x)(x = \text{Hamlet})$ must be true if we are to compare Hamlet with some other member of D . Frege too, then, fails to provide a sense of 'is a predicate' such that, in that sense, it is clear both that existence is not a predicate and that Anselm's argument requires it to be one.

What *does* Kant's argument show, then? How could anyone be led to suppose that Kant's claim did dispose of the Ontological Argument? This last question is not altogether easy to answer. What Kant's argument does show, however, is that one cannot "define things into existence"; it shows that one cannot, by adding existence to a concept that has application contingently if at all, get a concept that is necessarily exemplified. For let C be any whole concept and C^{-E} be that whole concept diminished with respect to existence. If the proposition $(\exists x)C^{-E}x$ is contingent, so is $(\exists x)Cx$. Kant's argument shows that the proposition *there exists an object to which C applies* is logically equivalent to *there exists an object to which C^{-E} applies*; hence, if either is contingent, so is the other. And this result can be generalized. For *any* concept C , singular or general, if it is a contingent truth that C is exemplified, it is also a contingent truth that the concept derived

from *C* by annexing existence to it is exemplified. From a concept that has application contingently—e.g., *crow*—we can't, by annexing existence to it, get a concept that necessarily applies; for if it is a contingent truth that there exist some crows, it is also a contingent truth that there are existent crows.

But of course Anselm needn't have thought otherwise. Schopenhauer describes the Ontological Argument as follows: "On some occasion or other someone excogitates a conception, composed out of all sorts of predicates, among which, however, he takes care to include the predicate actuality or existence, either openly or wrapped up for decency's sake in some other predicate, such as perfection, immensity, or something of the kind."⁶ If this *were* Anselm's procedure—if he started with some concept that has instances contingently if at all and then annexed *existence* to it—then indeed his argument would be subject to Kant's criticism. But he didn't, and it isn't. And Kant's objection shows neither that there are no necessary existential propositions nor that the proposition *God exists* is not necessary—any more than it shows that *there is a prime between 50 and 55* is a contingent proposition.

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ANIMADVERSIONS ON PLANTINGA'S KANT *

PLANTINGA presents three "interpretations" of "the heart of Kant's objection" to "the Ontological Argument." He argues that, when Kant's objection is construed in accordance with the first of these interpretations, it is subject to an obvious difficulty; and when it is construed in accordance with the other two interpretations, it is irrelevant to the version of the Ontological Argument presented by Anselm in *Proslogion* II. In concluding, he argues that what Kant in fact showed in the section of the *Critique* under consideration is also nothing to which Anselm need have objected.

The first two interpretations purport to be interpretations of Kant's denial that existence is a "real" predicate or property.

⁶ "The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason," tr. Mme. Carl Hildebrand, reprinted in A. Plantinga, ed., *The Ontological Argument* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 66–67.

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