

Three Versions of the Ontological Argument

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Suppose that each of two texts contains a philosophical argument. What is it for them to contain the *same* argument? In my view there are clear, straightforward cases of this – and cases that are not of the following trivial kind: the author of one of the texts *intends* to reproduce the argument of the other and does so competently. But there are cases in which the question whether the argument of one text is the same argument as that of another text has no straightforward answer.

Chapters 2 and 3 of Anselm’s *Proslogion*, on the one hand, and Book V of Descartes’s *Meditations*, on the other, constitute one of these cases. Kant invented the designation “the ontological proof [*Beweis*]” as a name for an argument he knew from Descartes (and from refinements of Descartes’s argument in the writings of Leibniz and Wolff). Later writers applied this name to Anselm’s argument. (I am not sure who was the first to do this; Hegel certainly did.) But to call Anselm’s argument and Descartes’s argument by the same name is to imply that they are the same argument. And is that so? And what does that question mean? Here is one way of understanding the latter question: To ask whether Anselm’s argument and Descartes’s argument are the same argument is to ask whether any possible objection to either argument is relevant to, and applies with equal validity to, the other. By that rather demanding criterion, the two arguments are not the same. And neither is the same as the “modal ontological argument” that one finds in various recent writers – I am thinking particularly of Charles Hartshorne and Alvin Plantinga – in the (broadly speaking) analytical tradition. Still, it must be conceded that these three arguments have a great deal in common. And that fact, presumably, is what leads philosophers to speak of them as three “versions of the ontological argument”. (Most Anglophone philosophers, I among them, prefer ‘ontological argument’ to ‘ontological

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proof’.) That phrase, popular and useful as it is, probably doesn’t bear up very well under close logical scrutiny – for it seems to imply that there is some argument that is *the* ontological argument, an argument of which the eleventh-century argument, the seventeenth-century argument, and the twentieth-century argument, are “versions”. But what argument, exactly, is this argument that is *the* ontological argument – and what is it for Argument A to be a “version” of argument B? (If Argument A is a version of Argument B, is Argument B a version of Argument A? You may well ask.) Well, established usage laughs at logic, and it is certainly common enough to speak of versions of an argument – the ontological argument, the cosmological and teleological arguments, the Consequence Argument, or what have you. In speaking as if the three arguments I shall discuss were versions of some one “background” argument – call it by what name you will – I mean to imply nothing more than whatever is contained in the vague statement that they exhibit a family resemblance. Or here is a statement that is a little less vague: Granted, a valid objection to one of the three arguments is not necessarily a valid – or even a relevant – objection to either of the others; nevertheless, if one is interested in having at one’s disposal all the available objections to each of the three arguments, and if one knows of an objection that applies to one of them, one would be well advised to consider carefully the question whether that objection also applies (or can be adapted so as to apply) to the others.

I have so far identified the three arguments I mean to discuss by reference to the philosophers who propounded them. I now propose designations for each of the arguments that are based on their content; I will call the three arguments the Meinongian Argument, the Conceptual Argument, and the Modal Argument.

1 The Meinongian Argument

According to St. Anselm, there are two modes of being (or of existence), a weaker, less demanding one, and a stronger, more demanding one. (These two modes are not exclusive: a thing can enjoy both.) God – that is *aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*, something than which nothing greater can be thought or conceived – uncontroversially enjoys the weaker of these two modes (it is uncontroversial that God *is* or *exists* in the weaker sense of ‘is’/‘exist’); the question to which the argument is addressed is: Does he also enjoy being in the more demanding mode? And what the argument attempts to show is that God cannot, as it were, be confined to the weaker mode of being; if he *is* in the weaker mode, it follows that he *is* in the more demanding mode. (And it is this stronger mode of being that the Fool means the word ‘est’ to express when he says, “Non est Deus”. That is to say, it is only the stronger or more demanding kind of being that atheists deny to God.)

This very abstract statement of some of the ideas that figure in Anselm’s argument is somewhat misleading in that it suggests that Anselm’s argument was concerned

with God's nature or essence. What I have said might be taken to imply that the argument had the following premise:

God's essence is such as to preclude his enjoying only the weaker mode of being.

Both Gaunilo and Aquinas seem to have supposed that Anselm's argument did depend on this premise, and have said that, although we Christians *believe* that God's essence is incompatible with his non-existence, this article of faith cannot serve as a premise in a philosophical argument for his existence. For, like all creatures, we human beings are unable to grasp the divine essence, and we can therefore know that his essence includes his existence only by revelation. (An aside: almost all the commentators on Anselm I have read translate his '*esse*' as either 'be' or 'exist' as the mood takes them. I will follow them in this practice for the moment, and will say more about 'be' and 'exist' presently.)

But this understanding of Anselm's argument is a misunderstanding. The argument does not presuppose that we to whom the argument is addressed grasp or understand the divine nature in its entirety, but only that we understand a certain *name* of God, and have a sufficient partial understanding of the divine nature to know that that nature "authorizes" the application of that name to God. (The name, of course, is 'something a greater than which cannot be conceived'.) Anselm is certainly no friend of apophatic theology. He would say that the statement that either a being grasps God's nature in its entirety or else must find God utterly incomprehensible – or comprehensible only through negation – is based on a false opposition. To adapt a figure he uses in his *Reply to Gaunilo*, if we cannot look directly at the sun, it does not follow that we cannot see daylight. And, in Anselm's view, our partial grasp of God's nature is sufficient to show us that the applicability of the name 'something a greater than which cannot be conceived' to God is a consequence of that nature.

I now turn to the argument. What I have said implies that the argument presupposes an ontology that is in a certain very loose sense Meinongian – hence my designation "the Meinongian Argument". I want now to say something about this ontology and about what I mean by calling it Meinongian. I ask you to consider what Anselm says about a painter and his picture:

"... cum pictor praecogitat quae facturus est, habet quidem in intellectu, sed nondum intelligit esse quod nondum fecit. Cum vero iam pinxit, et habet in intellectu et intelligit esse quod iam fecit."

"... when a painter thinks beforehand of what he is about to make, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand it to be because he has not yet made it. When he has now actually painted it, he has it both in his understanding and understands it to be because he has now made it."
(Proslogion II)

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Let me tell a story of a painter and his painting that contains a little more detail than Anselm's. In the course of telling the more detailed story, I shall provide some commentary that lays out in very rough form the ontology – the theory of being – I ascribe to Anselm. (In presenting his argument, Anselm uses the verb 'existere' only once; his preferred verb is 'esse'. Like most philosophers and theologians who have written on Anselm's argument, I find no philosophical significance in Anselm's preference for 'esse', and in the remainder of my discussion of his argument, I will use 'exist' and 'be' interchangeably.) In the story and commentary, I will use the word 'item' – the most "ontologically neutral" word I can think of – as the most general count-noun. That is, in my use everything, everything without qualification, is an item; an item is anything that can be referred to by a pronoun.

Velasquez has just completed his famous portrait of Prince Philip Prosper. It – this item – stands before him. It is an item that exists *in re*, in reality. A year earlier – long before Velasquez had received his commission and had as yet not given any thought to painting the young prince –, it did not exist *in re*. Possibly it did not exist in any mode, but this is a point on which *Proslogion* provides no guidance. However that may be, six months ago, after Velasquez had begun thinking seriously about it, but before he had mixed his pigments or stretched his canvas, this painting, this item, did not exist *in re* but did exist *in intellectu* – for Velasquez was thinking about it, "precogitating" it, one might say. It was the object of his precogitation. And it is one and the same item that now stands before Velasquez and which three months ago existed *in solo intellectu* (that is, it existed *in intellectu* but not *in re*) and was then the object of Velasquez's thought. In fact, that very item that once existed *in solo intellectu* is in 2011 a visible, tangible presence in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna – although you would probably be arrested if you did touch it.

It is important to realize that when Anselm applies the phrase 'exists *in solo intellectu*' to something, he does not mean to imply that the thing of which he speaks is in any sense a mental object or thing or item. For all I know, mental images of the finished painting were a part of the furniture of Velasquez's mind long before he put brush to canvas. But these images, if such there were, existed *in re*. Their existence was "mental" only in the sense that they existed and were mental items. To be more specific, they were mental *representations*, representations of a painting, and were, of course, not themselves paintings. But the item of which they were mental representations was strictly and literally a painting, albeit a painting that existed *in solo intellectu*. An item is not said to exist "*in solo intellectu*" because it is an inhabitant of a mental realm called the intellect. Rather – this is Anselm's idea – for an item to exist *in solo intellectu* is for it to enjoy a mode of being or existence that is accessible by, and only by, intellectual apprehension. Arthur C. McGill, the author of one of the many English translations of *Proslogion*, has rendered '*in intellectu*' as '*in relation to the intellect*'. In my view, this "translation" blurs the line between translation and commentary, but I think the commentary is correct: existence in the

intellect is existence in a mode such that one can be aware of the items that exist in that mode as objects of thought. And one can be aware of items that exist in the intellect alone *only* as objects of thought. It can be true of an item that exists *in re* that it, that very item, *used* to exist *in solo intellectu*. It is also important to realize that existence *in solo intellectu* is not a private affair; it would be an ontological solecism to say that a painting exists *in solo intellectu pictoris* – or it would at any rate if those words were meant to imply that of metaphysical or logical or conceptual necessity, the painting could be the object of only the painter’s thought. If one is willing to say that at a certain moment Velasquez’s portrait existed in Velasquez’s intellect although not yet in reality, one should be equally willing to say that at that moment it existed in God’s intellect (assuming that one is a theist), and, depending on the factual aspects of the contemporary situation, it might well have been true at that time that the same painting that did not yet exist in reality but did exist in Velasquez’s intellect also existed in the intellects of the assistants in his studio. But it is better not to qualify ‘*in intellectu*’ by reference to particular intellects. It is better not to use phrases like ‘in Velasquez’s intellect’ or ‘in God’s intellect’. It is better to leave ‘*in intellectu*’ as impersonal as ‘*in re*’.

It can, moreover, be a meaningful and non-trivial question whether an item that is the object of someone’s thought – and which therefore exists *in intellectu* – also exists *in re*. Suppose, for example, that Velasquez awakens in a hospital bed and is told that he suffered a severe blow to the head three days before. He finds that he has no memory at all of the last six months of his life. He asks, “My painting of the Infante Filipe – I was about to start work on it. Did I paint it? Does it exist?” Each of these questions, if Anselm is right, has exactly the logical structure and semantical features its syntax suggests: there is a particular item, a particular painting, that is the object of Velasquez’s thought, and he wants to know whether *it*, that very painting, exists *in re* or *in solo intellectu*.

As a painting *is* a painting – *is* one of the objects that falls within the extension of the property *being a painting* – whether it exists *in re* or *in solo intellectu*, so *aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit* is something than which nothing greater can be conceived whether it exists *in re* or, as the Fool supposes, *in solo intellectu*. These propositions might be described as Anselm’s anticipation of Meinong’s principle of *Außersein*, of the independence of predication and being, of his doctrine that the object stands beyond being and non-being. (I must repeat my assertion that it is only in a very loose sense that I contend that Anselm is a Meinongian. There are certainly important differences between the unreflective philosophy of being that I contend is presupposed in *Proslogion* and Meinong’s philosophy of being and non-being – which of course is at the farthest possible remove from “unreflective”. For one thing, Meinong regarded *Existenz* as one of two modes of *Sein*, whereas ‘*existere*’ and ‘*esse*’ are for Anselm stylistic variants. And Meinong would certainly not say that an unpainted painting enjoyed a weaker mode of existence or being than a painting that

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has been painted; he would say rather that the unpainted painting was an inhabitant of both the realm of non-being and its province the non-existent. Finally, there is the fact that the population of Meinong's realm of non-being is not affected by what mental acts thinkers happen to have performed, and it is possible that Anselm would have said – if the question had come up – that a painting of the Holy Family that exists *in solo intellectu* would not have existed even in that mode if the painter who is “precogitating” it had never considered making a painting of the Holy Family.)

And now the argument. We all know how it goes. The Fool says in his heart that there is no God. But if the Fool is really to be denying the existence of *God*, he must name God properly or he will not, if I may so express myself, be denying existence to the right item. That is to say, he must use the name ‘Something than which nothing greater can be conceived’ or some very similar name. In this exposition of the argument, I’ll abbreviate this name as ‘*Aliquid*’. And he is obviously not denying that *Aliquid* exists *in intellectu*, for *Aliquid* is an object of his, the Fool’s, thought. No, what he is saying is that *Aliquid* does not exist *in re*, that *Aliquid* exists *in solo intellectu*. Suppose, then, that he is right; suppose that *Aliquid* exists *in solo intellectu*. Then one can conceive of a being greater than *Aliquid* – one need only conceive of a being that is like *Aliquid* in every respect but one, namely that it exists *in re*. (“Which”, Anselm says, “is greater”. That is, existence *in re* is greater than existence *in solo intellectu*. Many commentators have made the point that it is not clear whether Anselm’s premise is that any entity that exists in reality is greater than any entity that exists in the understanding alone, or only that if *x* exists in the understanding alone and *y* is in every respect like *x* but for the fact that *y* exists in reality, then *y* is greater than *x*. It seems evident, however, that Anselm *needs* only the weaker premise.)

Anselm’s argument may therefore be seen as a deduction of the proposition:

It is possible to conceive of something that is greater than something than which nothing greater can be conceived.

from the proposition:

Something than which nothing greater can be conceived exists *in solo intellectu*.

And if this deduction is logically valid, then the latter proposition must be false (and indeed necessarily false), since the former is obviously self-contradictory. It follows that God exists *in re* – that is, that something than which nothing greater can be conceived exists *in re*. For to exist *in solo intellectu* is to exist *in intellectu* and not *in re*, and, therefore, to exist *in intellectu* but not *in solo intellectu* is to exist *in re*.

Anselm’s reasoning depends on many premises. (I am using ‘premise’ in the broadest possible sense.) It seems to me that there are five of them:

The Thesis of the Suitability of the Name: That Anselm’s “name” was well chosen (that an argument for the existence of something than which nothing greater can be conceived is indeed an argument for the existence of God, and not, say, an argument for the existence of the neo-Platonic One).

The Meinongian Existence Thesis: That even if the Fool is right when he says that something than which nothing greater can be conceived does not exist in reality, it remains true that the phrase ‘something than which nothing greater can be conceived’ denotes a certain item – an item that enjoys a weaker, less demanding mode of existence than existence in reality, to wit, existence *in intellectu*. And that item is accessible to the intellect, is the object of various of our intentional states. It is the object of an intentional state of Anselm’s when he says, “You so truly are that you cannot be thought not to be”, and it is equally an object of an intentional state of the Fool’s when he says, “There is no God”.

The Meinongian Predication Thesis: That the item that is denoted by ‘something than which nothing greater can be conceived’ is – without qualification – something than which nothing greater can be conceived: it has this property whether it exists *in re* or *in solo intellectu*.

The Existential Greatness Thesis: That if x and y are exactly alike save that x exists *in re* and y exists *in solo intellectu*, then x is greater than y .

The Impossibility of Conception Thesis: That it is impossible to conceive of something that is greater than something than which nothing greater can be conceived.

If these five premises (or assumptions or presuppositions of the argument or whatever one wishes to call them) are granted, then it seems to me that the argument is sound. Perhaps indeed it deserves to be called a *proof* of the existence of *God* – although whether it has that status would depend not only on the truth-value of its premises but also on their epistemic status.

The argument, proof or not, raises various interesting and important questions that I will not discuss. The most important of all is this: can a parallel argument be used to “prove” the existence of, e.g., an island than which no greater island can be conceived? (And I will not discuss the question whether *Proslogion* contains a second, modal argument for the existence of God – or whether the conclusion of that second argument is not ‘*God exists*’ but rather the conditional statement ‘*If God exists, he so truly exists that he cannot be conceived not to exist*’, a conclusion that an atheist might well accept.) I will do no more than make two brief remarks about one of the five propositions I have identified as “premises” of the argument, the Meinongian Existence Thesis.

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It seems to me to be evident that Anselm's argument really does depend on or presuppose this thesis. The Meinongian (or quasi-Meinongian) ontology whose tacit acceptance I have ascribed to Anselm seems to me to be inextricably bound up in his reasoning. That is, any attempt to reformulate the argument of *Proslogion* as an argument that does not presuppose two modes of existence must yield – if anything – an argument that is simply not Anselm's.

And it seems to me to be evident that Meinongianism in any form is simply wrong – the classical Meinongianism of Meinong and his students is wrong; the present-day “neo-Meinongianism” of philosophers like Terence Parsons is wrong; the “primitive” Meinongianism of Anselm is wrong. But I have defended this thesis elsewhere, and will not defend it here. My only object has been to show that Anselm's argument presupposes, and essentially presupposes, an ontology that is – in the qualified sense I have laid out – a Meinongian ontology.

2 The Conceptual Argument

I believe that in the fifth of Descartes's *Meditations* one can find a “version of the ontological argument” that is not Meinongian, that does not presuppose anything like modes of being or existence. (Descartes's correspondence and the *Discourse on Method* are also valuable sources for his thoughts about this argument.) This “conceptual” argument, as I shall call it, proceeds rather by attempting to show that a certain concept – the concept of a supremely perfect being – is such that there must, of necessity, be something to which it applies. I concede at the outset that the argument to which I allude cannot be described as “Descartes's ontological argument” without, to borrow a well-known phrase, some risk of terminological inexactitude. I concede that Descartes's writings on the ontological argument are shot through with language that strongly suggests a kind of Meinongianism. Indeed, Anthony Kenny in his book on Descartes argues very forcefully and cogently for the conclusion that Descartes's ontological argument presupposes a Meinongian ontology, an ontology that is in fact very similar to the one I have ascribed to Anselm.¹ Let me, therefore, put forward only this modest thesis: One can in Descartes's writings *find the materials* for a conceptual version of the ontological argument. This argument does not rest on the assumption that the phrase ‘ens summe perfectum’ denotes something – something that uncontroversially enjoys a certain relatively undemanding mode of existence and may, on investigation, prove to enjoy existence in some more demanding mode as well; much less does the argument presuppose that the referent of this phrase is a supremely perfect being no matter what mode or modes of existence it may enjoy.

In any case, my interest is in the argument itself, and not in the question whether the argument can properly be ascribed to Descartes. (I will, however, simply as a

¹See chapter VII of [2].

matter of literary convenience, occasionally ascribe the argument I shall be discussing to Descartes.) Since I am not trying to be true to Descartes's text, I will take the liberty of employing in my statement of the argument a certain decidedly non-Cartesian technical term whose function is to force its users always to make a clear distinction between a concept and the thing or things that concept applies to – a virtue that is not an invariable feature the language Descartes uses in Meditation V.

And here, finally, is the argument:

- (1) To each concept or idea, we may assign a proposition that is that idea's "anti-existential proposition." (This is that decidedly non-Cartesian technical term.) The concept of the anti-existential proposition of an idea is best explained by example:

The anti-existential proposition of the idea of a mountain is the proposition that there are no mountains.

The anti-existential proposition of the idea of a triangle is the proposition that there are no triangles.

...and so on.

- (2) Each concept or idea, moreover, *includes* certain properties. The concept of an idea's including a property is, again, best explained by example:

The idea of a mountain includes the property extension.

The idea of a [Euclidian] triangle includes the property "having interior angles whose sum is equal to two right angles".

...and so on.

- (3) The idea or concept of a supremely perfect being is the idea of a being who possesses all perfections.
- (4) Existence is a perfection.
- (5) The idea of a supremely perfect being, therefore, includes existence.
- (6) If an idea includes existence, then its anti-existential proposition is self-contradictory.
- (7) The proposition that there is no supremely perfect being is therefore self-contradictory.
- (8) There is, therefore, a supremely perfect being. QED

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Although it is not strictly speaking a premise of his argument in the narrowest sense, Descartes explicitly makes the point that it is a rather, well, *exceptional* thing for a concept or idea to include existence. He explicitly says that the idea of a triangle does not include existence and that the idea of a mountain does not include existence, and that, therefore – if I may attempt to translate his assertion into my terminology – no reflection on either of these concepts could possibly show that their respective anti-existential propositions were self-contradictory. (What Descartes actually says is that the idea of a triangle does not include *its* existence and that the idea of a mountain does not include *its* existence – and that the idea of a supremely perfect being does include *its* existence. But if we ask what the antecedent of the possessive pronoun in such statements is, we can provide no sensible answer to this question that does not imply some sort of Meinongianism.)

What shall we say about this argument? Well, we might attempt to apply to it the famous thesis of Kant's that was the core of the standard refutation of the ontological argument for two centuries: that existence is a "logical", not a "real", predicate. (Kant's word is 'Sein' not 'Existenz', but the distinction between being and existence, if there is one, is not in play here.) And that course is certainly open to us, for whether the argument I have laid out can properly be ascribed to Descartes or not, it certainly shares with Descartes's argument the premise at which Kant's thesis was directed: that existence is a perfection.

I would gloss Kant's statement that existence is a logical, and not a real predicate, as follows:

The word 'exists' is, of course, a grammatical predicate. A sentence like 'Vladimir Putin exists' is, from the point of view of the grammarian, as good an example of a subject-predicate sentence as is 'Vladimir Putin weighs 60 kilos'. But the grammatical predicate 'exists' (unlike the predicate 'weighs 60 kilos') does not express a property – attribute, quality, feature, characteristic – of things. The predicate 'weighs 60 kilos' expresses the common property of all things that weigh 60 kilos, but 'exists' does not express the common property of all things that exist – that is, the property that is common to everything.

I will not discuss Kant's arguments for this thesis. I will remark only that its application to Descartes's argument is obvious: a perfection, however we may understand the idea of a perfection, must be a property. Hence, Descartes's premise 'Existence is a perfection' is false. (I do not claim that this brief remark includes everything Kant had to say about the relations between the two theses 'Existence is a logical not a real predicate' and 'Existence is a perfection'.)

I agree with Kant that Descartes's argument is defective, and I agree that the defect is, very broadly speaking, a logical defect, but I do not believe that he has correctly identified the defect. For one thing, it seems evident to me that existence is

indeed a property, and is, in fact, a property held in common by all things. It is the property expressed by the open sentence ‘there is something that is identical with x ’. As wisdom is the property of being an x such that x is wise and “weighing 60 kilos” is the property of being an x such that x weighs 60 kilos, so existence is the property of being an x such that there is something that is identical with x . And if this is not granted, if one insists that existence is not a property, the Kantian critique of Descartes’s argument nevertheless faces the following formidable difficulty: whether existence is a property or not, necessary existence is certainly a property (it may be, as many have believed it to be, an impossible property; but impossible properties are a kind of property – just as impossible propositions are a kind of proposition).

If, moreover, necessary existence is a property, it is no doubt a perfection (in fact a rather better candidate for the office “perfection” than mere existence). Given that *necessary existence* is a perfection, one can easily construct an argument for the necessary existence of a supremely perfect being, an argument very similar in its logical structure to Descartes’s argument. And this second argument, whatever difficulties it may face, cannot be refuted by a demonstration that existence is not a property.

Let all this be granted, however, and it still seems evident that both Descartes’s argument and the structurally similar argument involving necessary existence to which I have briefly alluded are defective – and that the defect is essentially the same in both cases. It remains only to identify this common defect. I identify the defect in Descartes’s argument as follows: it has a false premise, to wit:

If an idea includes existence, then its anti-existential proposition is self-contradictory.

(The corresponding premise of the “necessary existence” argument is ‘If an idea includes necessary existence, then its anti-existential proposition is self-contradictory.’)

To see this, let us ask what it is for an idea or concept to include a property. (I’m going at this point to switch to the word ‘concept’ in order to avoid some stylistic problems that the word ‘idea’ sometimes raises.) In presenting Descartes’s argument, I sidestepped this question by saying that the relevant sense of ‘include’ was best explained by giving examples, two of which I proceeded to supply. But, as Socrates would remind us, we philosophers should not be content to explain a philosophically important concept by presenting a series of examples; we should rather strive to provide an account or definition of that concept.

I will not actually attempt to present a Chisholm-style definition of the phrase ‘the concept x includes the property F ’. It will suffice for my purposes to present a condition that (I contend) is sufficient for a concept’s including a given property:

If it is logically demonstrable that everything the concept x applies to (or ‘everything that falls under the concept x ’) has the property F , then x includes F .

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(For example, the concept of an omnipotent being includes the property omnipotence.) Call this statement the sufficiency thesis. It seems evident to me that the sufficiency thesis is true. (Or perhaps I should say: if the sufficiency thesis *isn't* true, I have no idea what it is for a property to be “included” in a concept.) Now some philosophers may raise questions about the sufficiency thesis; they may wonder whether it is indeed evident that, for example, the concept of a rock star includes the property of being either a rock star or a caterpillar. If anyone does indeed regard this consequence of the sufficiency thesis as problematic – I don't – I'll simply issue a promissory note: I could present a more elaborate version of the sufficiency thesis that did not have consequences of this sort; and the conclusion I shall derive from the above statement of the sufficiency thesis would also follow from the more elaborate thesis.

And here is the conclusion: If the sufficiency thesis is indeed true, every concept includes existence: the concept of a mountain, the concept of a triangle, the concept of a unicorn, the concept of a round square – even the concept of a non-existent object. But let us consider only the concept of a mountain. Here is an instance of a theorem of standard logic:

$$\forall x(x \text{ is a mountain} \rightarrow \exists y y = x).$$

If, as I suppose, ‘ x exists’ and ‘ $\exists y y = x$ ’ are identical in meaning, we have our conclusion: the concept of a mountain includes existence. Or here is an intuitive way to put the same point: the concept of a non-existent mountain is a contradiction in terms: it is logically impossible for there to be a non-existent mountain. (This result is not presented as a refutation of Meinong; it is presented simply as a consequence of rejecting Meinong – as a consequence of the thesis that ‘ x exists’ and ‘ $\exists y y = x$ ’ are identical in meaning.)

And we have our counterexample to Descartes's premise: the concept of a mountain includes existence but the anti-existential proposition of that concept – the proposition that there are no mountains – is not self-contradictory. (And what about the corresponding premise of the “necessary existence” argument: ‘If an idea includes necessary existence, then its anti-existential proposition is self-contradictory’? Consider the concept of a necessarily existent round square. This concept obviously includes the property necessary existence; and the non-self-contradictoriness of the proposition that there are no necessarily existent round squares is conveniently attested by its truth.)

Here is a simple point way to put this point, or what is essentially this point: a non-existent unicorn is a contradiction in terms; and yet the non-existence of unicorns is – experience testifies – not a contradiction in terms. By exactly the same logical token, a non-existent supremely perfect being is a contradiction in terms, but the non-existence of a supremely perfect being is not a contradiction in terms. The non-

existence of a supremely perfect being may be a metaphysically impossible state of affairs (that is my own conviction), but it is not a contradiction in terms.

3 The Modal Argument

As there are versions of the ontological argument, there are versions of versions of the ontological argument. At any rate, there is more than one version of the modal argument. Here is the version I think is the clearest and most elegant.

A perfect being, let us say, is a being that possesses all perfections essentially. (That is to say, a being is perfect in a possible world w if and only if it possesses all perfections in every world accessible from w .) Necessary existence, moreover, is a perfection. (A being possesses necessary existence in a world w if and only if it exists in every world accessible from w .) Suppose that a perfect being (so defined) is possible. Suppose, that is, that there is a perfect being in some world w accessible from the actual world (α). But then some being x that exists in α is a perfect being in w – since there is a perfect being (and hence a necessarily existent being) in w , w is accessible from α , and the accessibility relation is symmetrical. Might x exist only contingently in α ? No, for in that case there is some world w_1 accessible from α in which x does not exist; and w_1 is accessible from w , since the accessibility relation is transitive.

But is x a perfect being in α ? Yes, for consider any given perfection – say, wisdom. The being x is essentially wise in w , and hence is wise in α , since α is accessible from w . But might x be only accidentally wise in α ? No, for in that case there is a world w_2 , accessible from α , in which x exists but is not wise. But, owing to the transitivity of the accessibility relation, w_2 is accessible from w . And the point is perfectly general: given the symmetry and transitivity of the accessibility relation, x will have a property essentially in α if it has it essentially in any world accessible from α . There therefore actually exists a being that has all perfections essentially – that is to say, there actually exists a perfect being. (Might someone protest that we have shown that the being x possesses necessary existence in α but have not shown that x possesses necessary existence *essentially* in α ? Well, if the accessibility relation is transitive, then anything that is necessarily existent is essentially necessarily existent. But it is not necessary to include a demonstration of that thesis in our argument, for we know that x possesses all perfections essentially in w , and hence is essentially necessarily existent in w ; it therefore follows from what we have shown that x is essentially necessarily existent in α .)

There are two important differences between this argument and the two other arguments we have examined: (a) it does not presuppose any sort of Meinongianism; it makes no appeal to the idea of distinct modes of being or existence, and (b) it contains no logical mistake. It does, however, depend essentially on the assumption

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that the accessibility relation is both symmetrical and transitive. Loosely speaking, the modal logic of the argument is S5, the strongest modal system.

This is not the case with every version of the modal argument. Some are valid in weaker modal systems, but those arguments require additional premises. In one sense, our argument has only one premise: that a perfect being (defined as we have defined ‘perfect being’) is possible. Consider, by way of contrast, the first of Hartshorne’s modal arguments.² Let ‘ G ’ represent the conclusion of the argument – ‘A perfect being exists’, ‘God exists’, however you want to state Hartshorne’s conclusion. This argument had two premises:

$$G \prec \Box G, \quad \text{i.e., } \Box(G \rightarrow \Box G),$$

$$\Diamond G.$$

Hartshorne appealed to S5 in his deduction of G from these two premises, but it was soon pointed out that the argument was valid in the weaker system B . (The validity of B is equivalent to the statement that the accessibility relation is symmetrical; it does not require that it be transitive.) Hartshorne, moreover, later offered a modal ontological argument that required almost no modal logic at all:

$$\Box G \vee \Box \neg G,$$

$$\Diamond G,$$

$$\text{hence, } \Box G,$$

$$\text{hence, } G.$$

This argument requires no modal logic beyond the interdefinability of the possibility and necessity operators and the validity of the principle $\Box\phi \rightarrow \phi$. One could regard the first premise of both Hartshorne’s arguments as substitute for an appeal to the strong modal system S5. At any rate, both premises follow from the assumption that the accessibility relation is both symmetrical and transitive (reading ‘ G ’ as ‘There is a necessarily existent being that has all perfections essentially’).

The modal ontological argument – in any of its versions, for they all have a “possibility” premise not very different from the one I have stated – suffers from only one defect: there seems to be no *a priori* reason, or none accessible to the human intellect (perhaps none accessible to any finite intellect) to think that it is possible for there to be a necessarily existent being that has all perfections essentially. I myself think that this premise of the argument is true – but only because I think that there in fact *is* a necessarily existent being who has all perfections essentially. And my

²See section VI (especially pp. 49 and 50) of chapter 2 of [1]

reasons for thinking that are by no means *a priori*; they depend (so I suppose) on what that being has revealed about himself to humanity. And I do not mean simply that no *conclusive* reason for thinking that such a being is possible can be supplied by *a priori* human reasoning. I mean that human reason is impotent to discover by *a priori* reasoning any consideration whatever that should cause a human reasoner to raise whatever prior probability he or she may assign to the possibility of such a being.

And I would go further. I would say that, divine revelation apart, a human being should either assign a prior probability of 0.5 to the proposition that there is a necessarily existent being who possesses all perfections essentially or else refuse to assign it any probability at all. (Which of these would be the right thing to do depends on the resolution of some thorny questions in the philosophy of probability.)

My conviction that this is so rests in part on my conviction that no one has presented any cogent argument *a priori* for the conclusion that we ought to assign some probability lower than 0.5 to that proposition, a conviction that I will not defend here – since a defense could only take the form of successive examinations of each of the many arguments that has been offered for that conclusion. And, of course, it rests on my conviction that the arguments that have been offered (by Leibniz and Gödel, among others) for the conclusion that a perfect being is possible lend no support whatever to their conclusions. I will not defend this conviction either, since an adequate examination of these arguments is not possible within the scope of this paper (and since I have done so elsewhere).³

I conclude that whatever value the modal ontological argument may have, whatever philosophical rewards may attend a careful study of the argument, this value and these rewards are not epistemological: they will not provide the student of the argument with any sort of *reason for believing* that a perfect being exists. If a philosopher's sole interest in the modal ontological argument is in that sense epistemological, he or she will find it of no more interest than the following argument (formally identical with Hartshorne's second argument) for the truth of Goldbach's Conjecture (that every even number greater than 2 is equal to the sum of two primes – abbreviate this statement as '*G*')

$\Box G \vee \Box \neg G,$

$\Diamond G,$

hence, $\Box G,$

hence, $G.$

³In my essay, "Some Remarks on the Modal Ontological Argument" [3].

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This argument is indisputably valid and its first premise is indisputably true. It is equally indisputable, however, that this argument is not only not a proof of Goldbach's Conjecture but provides no reason whatever for thinking that Goldbach's Conjecture is true. And the reason for this can be simply stated: one could have no reason for thinking that Goldbach's Conjecture was possibly true unless that reason were a reason for thinking that Goldbach's Conjecture was true *simpliciter*. The point that this example illustrates may be generalized.

Let us say that a proposition is *epistemically neutral* (for a certain person or a certain population at a certain time) if the epistemic status of that proposition and the epistemic status of its denial (with respect to that person or population at that time) are identical. If an example of an epistemically neutral proposition (epistemically neutral for us, now) is wanted, I offer the following: the proposition that the number of stars in the Milky Way galaxy with a mass greater than that of our sun is even.

And let us say that a proposition is *non-contingent* if either that proposition or its denial is a necessary truth.

I contend that the "Goldbach" example is a special case of and illustrates the following general principle:

If a proposition p is non-contingent, and is known to be non-contingent by a certain person or certain population at a certain time, and if p is epistemically neutral for that person or population at that time, then the proposition that p is possibly true is also epistemically neutral for that person or population at that time.

(This principle would obviously not be valid if its application were not restricted to non-contingent propositions: consider the proposition that I offered as an example of a proposition that is epistemically neutral for us; I take it to be obvious that we are warranted or perfectly justified – insert your favorite term of epistemic commendation here – in believing that “the number of stars in the Milky Way galaxy with a mass greater than that of our sun being even” is a metaphysically possible state of affairs.) Any instance of this generalization I can think of is either obviously true or neither obviously true nor obviously false. Here is one that is obviously true (even more obviously true than the “Goldbach's Conjecture” instance). Consider some “vast” or “enormous” natural number – say Skewes's Number, at one time said to be the largest finite number that had figured essentially in any important mathematical result. Or, rather, take the following powers-of-10 approximation of that number: $10 \exp(10 \exp 34)$. And consider the proposition that the number of primes smaller than that number is even. It is evident that this proposition is non-contingent, and I believe it to be epistemically neutral for us. (It is certain that its truth-value could not be established by an enumeration of the primes smaller than $10 \exp(10 \exp 34)$ in any reasonable amount of time. A computer the size of the Hubble

universe that had been counting primes for a trillion years would have counted only a minuscule portion of the primes less than that number.) But it is certainly evident that there could not be a reason for thinking that this proposition was possibly true that was not a reason for thinking it true.

If the principle I have proposed is true, then – since the conclusion of any version of the modal ontological must be a non-contingent proposition, and since one of the premises of that argument must be the proposition that its conclusion is possibly true – no version of the modal ontological argument can serve as a vehicle by which one can pass from epistemic neutrality as regards its conclusion to warrant. Nor can it serve even as a vehicle that can transport its passengers from epistemic neutrality to some status that lies between epistemic neutrality and warrant.

I do not claim to have shown that the principle is correct. But I would propose that proponents of the thesis that that the modal ontological argument might have some epistemological value do at least this much: provide an example (an example that is at least somewhat plausible; I do not demand that it be indisputable) of a non-contingent proposition that is epistemically neutral for some population and is such that the proposition that it, the chosen proposition, is possibly true is not epistemically neutral for that population. In my view, the discovery of a proposition with those properties would be an important contribution to the study of the modal ontological argument.

References

- [1] Hartshorne Ch., *The Logic of Perfection*, Lasalle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Co., 1962.
- [2] Kenny A., *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy*, New York: Random House, 1968.
- [3] Van Inwagen P., “Some Remarks on the Modal Ontological Argument”, in *Metaphysik heute: Probleme und Perspektiven der Ontologie*, edited by M. Lutz-Bachman and T. M. Schmidt, Freiburg and Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 2007, 132 - 145.