

THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT REVISITED: A REPLY TO ROWE

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Abstract. Saint Anselm’s Ontological Argument is perhaps the most intriguing of all the traditional speculative proofs for the existence of God. Yet, his argument has been rejected outright by many philosophers. Most challenges stem from the basic conviction that no amount of logical analysis of a concept that is limited to the bounds of the “understanding” will ever be able to “reason” the existence in “reality” of any thing answering such a limited concept. However, it is not the intent of this paper to prove or disprove Anselm’s argument. Rather, in this paper we concern ourselves with arriving at a sound interpretation of Anselm’s leading critic – Immanuel Kant. Kant put forth perhaps the most vaunted criticism of Anselm’s argument. However, Kant has been perhaps the most misunderstood objector to Anselm’s argument. This paper confirms that charge, simultaneously offering what I believe to be a sound interpretation of Kant’s criticism.

Hence, even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For, when he hears of this he understands it. And whatever is understood exists in the understanding. And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exist in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality, which is greater.

Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists in both the understanding and in reality. (St. Anselm, *Proslogium*)¹

¹ Anselm, Saint, *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, Transl. S.N. Deane, with an Introduction by Charles Hartshorne, La Salle, Ill.; Open Court, 1961, p. 54.

In whatever way the understanding may have arrived at this concept, the existence of the concept's object still cannot be found analytically in the concept; for the cognition of the objects "existence" consists precisely in the object's being posited in itself "outside the thought. (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*)²

The above quotations, by Anselm and Kant though contemplating widely differing ideas, encapsulate a central dilemma that we will undertake to consider in this short discourse. Is existence a property applicable outside of thought (e.g., object in reference)? Or, is existence an existential quantifier that permeates our very discussion on existence, and as such is merely language that adds nothing to the world? Through an ingenious argument Anselm tries to establish that God must exist in "reality" as well as in the "understanding," simultaneously asserting that existence is a great-making quality (a predicate outside of thought), and since God is conceived as the greatest being, then it must follow logically that He exists. Conversely, Kant contends that existence is not a property outside of thought; it is a presupposed condition, and, as such, it cannot be inferred from the concept of the greatest being as being anything beyond its concept (e.g., presupposed condition). In this paper, I intend to critically analyze the dilemma above as it is echoed through William Rowe. I will show what I think to be Rowe's misinterpretation of Kant's position.

Anselm's argument

The key idea to Anselm's Ontological argument is that *existence* is a great-making quality. But what are we to make of this? Do we assume that that which exists is greater than that which does not? Although this question is never addressed in the "Proslogium," it is reasonable to assume he did not mean this. Perhaps what Anselm means is that anything that does not exist but might have existed would have been a greater thing if it had existed. As I see it, Anselm is not comparing two different things (one existing and one not existing) and saying that the first is therefore greater than the second. Rather, he is talking about *one* thing and pointing out that if it does not exist but might have existed, then *it* would have been a greater thing if it had existed. By using Anselm's distinction between existence in the understanding and existence in reality, we can now properly assert the key

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Transl. Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing, 1996, B667.

idea in his reasoning as follows: If something exists only in the understanding but might have existed in reality, then it might have been greater than it is.

Anselm states his Proof as follows:

1. “We believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.”
2. It is one thing for something to exist in the intellect and another for it to exist separately.
3. “Even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived.”
4. “And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone; then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater.”
5. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.

Anselm’s Proof in its formal reading may be somewhat difficult to interpret. For this reason, I shall attempt a clear interpretation and summarization of his argument. To one who questions whether (or simply denies that) there exists something of such a nature that nothing greater can be imagined, it is said that its existence is proved in the first place by the fact that anyone denying it already has it in his thought, since upon hearing it he understands what is said, and in the second place by the fact that what he understands necessarily exists not only in the mind but in reality as well. Thus, its existence is proved, because it is a greater thing to exist in reality as well than to exist in the mind alone, and if it exists only in the mind, then what exists in reality as well will be greater, and thus that which is greater than all else will be less than something else and not greater than all else, which is nonsense. Thus, what is greater than all else must necessarily exist, not only in the mind (which has already been acknowledged to be the case), but in reality as well, or else it could not be greater than all else.

Consider William Rowe’s tightened version of Anselm’s argument in logical premise/ conclusion formulation. He uses the term “God” in place of the longer phrase “the being than which none greater is possible” — wherever the term “God” appears we are to think of it as simply an abbreviation of the longer phrase.

1. God is defined as that being than which none greater is possible.
2. God exists in the understanding.
3. God might exist in reality.

Premises 1, 2, and 3 comprise the base of Anselm's argument. It is from these premises that Anselm believes it must follow that God exists in reality.

4. If God only exists in the understanding and might have existed in reality, then God might have been greater than he really is.
5. So, if God existed in reality, then he might have been greater than he really is.
6. Therefore, God is a being than which a greater is possible.
7. This is impossible, since by definition God is a being than which none greater is possible.
8. Therefore God exists in reality as well as in the understanding.³

There is no question as to the validity of this argument since it can be logically established easily by a *reductio ad absurdum*, in which instead of showing directly that the existence of God follows from premises 1 through 3, Anselm asks us to assume that the conclusion 8 is false, and then shows that the denial of 8, along with premise 1 through premise 6, leads to a contradiction.

However, despite its validity, this argument has been rejected outright by many philosophers. Most challenges stem from the basic conviction that no amount of logical analysis of a concept that is limited to the bounds of the understanding will ever be able to reason the existence in reality of any thing answering such a limited concept. But perhaps the most vaunted criticism of Anselm's argument is one of simple linguistics – found in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

Kant's objection

I should have hoped to put an end to these idle and fruitless disputations in a direct manner, by an accurate determination of the concept of existence, had I not found that the illusion which is caused by the confusion of a logical with a real predicate (that is, with a predicate which determines a thing) is almost

³ Rowe, William, L., 2007, *The Ontological Argument*, Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction, Wadsworth Publishing. p. 41.

beyond correction. Anything we please can be made to serve as a logical predicate; the subject can even be predicated of itself; for logic abstracts from all content. But a determining predicate is a predicate which is added to the concept of the subject and enlarges it. Consequently, it must not be already contained in the concept.⁴

By far the most incisive criticism to be posed to the Ontological Argument was put forth by Immanuel Kant. The above quote encapsulates the dilemma presented by this criticism. Kant's criticism is directed at the Anselmian presumption that existence is a predicate. As Kant sees it, since existence is absolutely not a predicate, and premise 4 of Anselm's argument implies that existence absolutely is a predicate, the argument must be rejected.

Kant considered all propositions to fall into one of two categories. They were either synthetic, that is, the subject term did not contain the predicate term, or analytic, that is, the subject term did contain the predicate term. The form of the synthetic proposition might be symbolized by "A is B" while the form of the analytic proposition might be symbolized by "AB is B." Now, there is no contradiction in saying that A is not B. Such a statement may be false, but its falsity is determined by some empirical method – it is contingent, not necessary. For example, the falsity of the proposition that "the sky is blue" would be contingent upon our perception; it very well could be gray. There is, however, a contradiction in saying that AB is not B, and this can be determined a priori. For example, the proposition "all bachelors are unmarried adult males" is necessarily true since it would be impossible for an adult male to be a bachelor and fail to be unmarried.

Kant accomplishes his criticism of the Ontological Argument by asking whether the proposition "God exists" is synthetic or analytic. If analytic, then the predicate "exists" adds nothing to our concept of God since the subject "God" would already contain the predicate "exists," which is just another way of saying that existence is not a real predicate. If synthetic, then the predicate "exists" can be removed without contradiction. Since the ontological argument proceeds by saying that the non-existence of God is self-contradictory, the proposition "God exists" must then be analytic, this making any so called proof a mere tautology.

And so naturally we ask, if existence does not add anything to the concept of a thing, what, then, is existence if not a predicate. Kant's answer is that existence is "merely the positing of a thing" or "the copula of a judgment," the point being that when we say "God exists" we are simply

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B626.

affirming that there is an object answering to the concept of God. We are not ascribing any new predicates to God, but merely judging that there is a subject, with all its predicates, in this world.

At (B627) Kant writes,

‘Existence’ is obviously not a real predicate, that is, it does not signify a concept of something that can be added to the concept of a thing. It merely signifies that a thing is posited, or it asserts that some qualities exist by themselves. In logic existence merely signifies the copula of judgment. The proposition, “God is omnipotent,” contains two concepts, each of which signifies a referent – God and omnipotence. The small word “is” does not add a new predicate, but only serves to establish the relationship between the predicate [omnipotence] and its subject “God.” When we say “God is,” or “There is a God”, we attach no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject itself along with all its predicates; in fact, we posit God as an object to which my concept of him refers. The content of both my concept of God, and God himself the object of my thought must be the same, and by the addition of the word “is” nothing can have been added to the concept. The judgment “God is” expresses still only what is possible although I think of its object [God] by use of the expression “God is” as given absolutely.

Another way of putting the argument above is that what is thought of as real has no more properties than what is thought of as merely possible. The relationship between the idea of a hundred dollars and the real object to which this idea corresponds establishes that the properties of both the hundred possible dollars (the idea of the dollars) and the real dollars (the object) must be the same, for otherwise the idea would not be an idea of the object. Sure, one’s financial position is undoubtedly very differently affected by the existence of a hundred real dollars than by the mere thought of a possible hundred dollars. The existence of an object is never analytically contained with the concept of that object; existence is always added to a concept synthetically. However, the hundred imaginary dollars is not in the least bit increased if indeed there are a hundred real dollars which exist outside the concept of the imaginary dollars. There is no intrinsic difference between the concept of a hundred real dollars and the concept of a hundred possible dollars.

Rower’s reaction

When we ascribe a quality or predicate to something we assert or presuppose that the thing exists and then ascribe the predicate to it. If this is in-

deed the case, then it is clear that existence cannot be a predicate which we can ascribe to or deny of some thing. If it were a predicate, then when we assert of something that it exists, we would actually be asserting or presupposing that it exists and then proceeding to predicate the existence of it.

Rowe best illustrates his interpretation of the above by way of the following example: If existence were a predicate, then in asserting “chimps exist” we would be asserting or presupposing that chimps exist and then going on to predicate existence of them. So, if existence were a predicate, then the affirmative existential statement “chimps exist” would be a redundancy. But clearly “chimps exist” is not a redundancy. Furthermore, in asserting the negative existential statement “gargoyles do not exist” we would be asserting or presupposing, if existence were a predicate, that gargoyles do exist and then going on to deny that existence attaches to them. And if existence were a predicate, then the statement “gargoyles do not exist,” would be a contradiction. But “gargoyles do not exist” is in fact not contradictory, as evidenced by its truth. What this shows, by Kant’s objection, is that existence is not a genuine predicate.⁵

What we deduce from the above example is that when we assert that chimps exist and gargoyles do not, we are not saying that certain things (chimps) have and certain other things (gargoyles) do not have a peculiar quantifier/predicate, existence; rather, we are saying something about the concept of the chimp and the concept of the gargoyle. We are saying that the concept of a chimp stems from our empirical understanding of what actually exists in the world, while the concept of a gargoyle does not apply to anything in the world with which we can reason empirically. And for Kant, that which cannot be reasoned empirically, as well as rationally, is that which we can have no knowledge of. It is in this sense that our conceptual knowledge is restricted. Thus far Rowe and Kant appear to be on the same page.

At (B629) Kant appears to concur with this deduction:

And here we find the source of our present difficulty. Were we dealing with an object of the senses, we could not confound the existence of the thing with the mere concept of it. For through the concept the object is thought only as conforming to the universal conditions of possible empirical knowledge in general, whereas through its existence it is thought as belonging to the context of experience as a whole. In being thus connected with the content of experience as a whole, the concept of the object is not, however, in the least enlarged;

⁵ William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, Wadsworth Publishing, 2007, p. 45.

all that has happened is that our thought has thereby obtained an additional possible perception. It is not, therefore, surprising that, if we attempt to think existence through the pure category alone, we cannot specify a single mark distinguishing it from mere possibility.

However, as Rowe demonstrates, although Kant's objection to the Ontological Argument appears to be conclusive, the objection does leave the door open for possible refutation. As an alternative conclusion Rowe suggests the following: Kant's contention, that in asserting the existence of something we are not ascribing a certain predicate or attribute to a thing, rests on a claim about the *nature* of predication. As such, Rowe contends that we can ascribe predicates to many things that do not exist. He offers the following: Consider the case of Dr. Doolittle, the animal lover. When we assert that Dr. Doolittle is an animal lover, we seem to be ascribing the predicate "animal lover" to the good doctor, but in making this ascription we are in no way presupposing that Dr. Doolittle actually exists. What Rowe's example suggests is that the claim, that whenever we ascribe a predicate to something we assert or presuppose its existence, is a false claim. As such, Kant's opponents may well contend that because the nature of predication is not clear in its requirements, Kant's objection cannot be held to be conclusive. I believe that Kant's objection is conclusive and that Rowe's latter claim (that the claim, that whenever we must ascribe a predicate to something we assert or presuppose its existence, is a false claim) is spurious.⁶

Rowe, on behalf of Dr. Doolittle, is making the claim that concepts need not contain existence, only the predicate. Here, even if existence is a predicate, it does not follow that the assertion of the existence of something is redundant. However, Kant is not denying this contention (such a claim is well taken in as much as Kant would agree that the existence of an object is never analytically contained within the concept of that object; existence is always added to a concept synthetically). Rather, he is simply saying that concepts of fictional characters can only be just that; to establish the reality of a character, we must presuppose existence as a fundamental element of its conceptual being. For if we cannot presuppose the existence of a concept's object, there can be no argument for the object's reality. This is Kant's whole point, and it is where Rowe misses the point. So even if Rowe's contention is true, it is only true in as much we are not trying to establish the *reality* of a given concept's object. Therefore, when we talk of existence as a predicate, we can only talk about real beings.

⁶ Rowe 2007, p. 45.