

Kant and the Ontological Argument

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Kant and the Ontological Argument

In the Transcendental Dialectic (Book II, Chapter III, Section 4) of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant briefly formulated a criticism of the ontological argument for the existence of God that has been accepted as conclusive by the greater portion of subsequent philosophers.

Within recent years, however, a minority of Anselmian scholars have maintained that Anselm, in the *Proslogium*, put forth two ontological proofs rather than one, and that Kant's criticism, though decisive against the first, fails to disturb the validity of the second. (It is doubtful whether Anselm distinguished between the two elements within his own writings, and Kant specifically attacked the writings of Leibnitz rather than Anselm. But the proof, as stated by Leibnitz, is a restatement of the first of Anselm's formulations, so we are justified in applying Kant's criticism directly to the *Proslogium*).

It is the purpose of this paper to:

- (a) restate the second ontological argument of Anselm, as proposed by the contemporary philosophers Charles Hartshorne and Norman Malcolm;
- (b) re-examine the nature of Kant's objection to the proof; and
- (c), determine whether the position of Kant, granted his metaphysical foundation, is not yet conclusive in undermining the validity of the proof.

It is my contention that Kant was successful in his formulation, and that the essence of his position is still valid.

II

Hartshorne and Malcolm, in their respective expositions, hold that Anselm was in effect stating two formulations of the proof in chapter's II and III of the *Proslogium*, and that Kant's criticism is valid solely against the logical structure of the former. In chapter II, Anselm insisted that

... 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 exists 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 both in the understanding and in reality.¹

Clearly, to Anselm, existence in reality was qualitatively 'greater' than existence in thought alone. Existence was in some sense, therefore, a perfection, and 'existence in reality' a higher level of perfection than 'existence in understanding' alone. Against this notion, Kant was to argue that existence can in no sense be predicated as adding to perfection, and that the concept of a possible perfect being contains fully as much perfection as any possible real counterpart in the objective world.

Hartshorne and Malcolm, accepting Kant's criticism as valid, contend however that it cannot be applied to the second of Anselm's formulations to be found in chapter III of the *Proslogium*.

And it assuredly exists so truly, that it cannot be conceived not to exist. For, it is possible to conceive of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist, and this is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, can be conceived not to exist, it is not that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this is an irreconcilable contra-diction. There is, then, so truly a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist; and this being thou art, O Lord, our God.

So truly, therefore, dost thou exist, O Lord my God, that thou canst not be conceived not to exist; and rightly. For, if a mind could conceive of a being better than thee, the creature would rise above the Creator; and this is most absurd. And, indeed, whatever else there is, except thee alone, can be conceived not to exist. To thee alone, therefore, it belongs to exist more truly than all other beings, and hence in a higher degree than all others . . . ²

¹ Anselm, *Proslogium*, chapter II, as quoted on page 163 of *Philosophy of Religion: A Book of Readings*, edited by George L. Abernethy and Thomas A. Langford (New York, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962).

² Ibid., pages 163-164 [from chapter III of the *Proslogium*].

For within this formulation, they suggest, Anselm no longer is saying that 'existence' is an element of perfection, but that 'the logical necessity of existence' is.

To Hartshorne, the nature of God must be dipolar, meaning that his logical abstract essence and concrete actuality must be distinguished as two sides of a coin upon which one not gaze simultaneously. Using the term 'existence' as Kant would 'concept', and claiming that Kant's monopolar conception of God as 'concrete actuality' or 'necessary concept' but not necessarily both (that is, one directly implying the other) prohibits him from understanding the nature of Anselm's position, Hartshorne argues that

The admission of a dipolar nature in the supreme reality frees the connection which Anselm discovered between perfection and necessity of existence from a certain paradox which is probably the chief cause of the prevalent failure to appreciate the ontological argument. The paradox is this: We intuitively feel that full, concrete actuality is a surd with respect to any abstract essence or formula. The definition of perfection, any definition, is clearly such a formula. Therefore . . . Now this reasoning is valid and certainly quite as cogent as Anselm's argument could possibly be. But, if we shift to a dipolar view of deity, we can reconcile the two reasonings. For what is proved by the famous proof, thus reinterpreted, is not any actuality, even divine, but only an existence, and in dipolar thinking these are radically distinct. The existence to be proved necessary is just as abstract as the essence connoted by 'perfect' or 'categorically supreme'. God exists if there is any divine actuality, any actual state, no matter which among possible, manifesting the divine essence.

Realization of a kind of possibility is what personal existence always means. I exist if some possible state of my life is actual, no matter which. In ordinary cases (and this includes that of any conceivable island, however 'perfect') both actuality and existence are contingent, because it depends upon the rest of the universe (and God) whether the life or existence of the thing can go on at all, or whether it begins at all. In the divine form of the distinction existence-actuality, actuality is still contingent, since there are alternative possibilities for the divine life or experience. But here there is no possibility of a world state excluding any-and-all divine experiences of that state. On the contrary, it follows from the very meaning of 'divinity' that, whatever happens, God can and will have experience of that happening and will accordingly exist. Thus the most cogent counter-argument to the proof turns out to be irrelevant to the proof itself – taken as a discovery that categorical supremacy, exclusion of all possible rivalry with other individuals, necessarily exists. The counter-argument is relevant (and fatal) only with respect to a proof favoring the monopolar interpretation of 'categorical supremacy'. For on that interpretation, a divine existent and a divine actuality cannot be distinguished, and thus our invincible intuition into the transcendence of actuality with respect to all essences bars the way to a proof of existence from essence. On the dipolar

interpretation, the objection falls; for here we assert as necessary no one divine actuality, but only that the class of divine actualities is not null. This 'non-nullity of the class, actualities realizing divine potentialities for experiencing', is itself plainly something abstract and general, no concrete particular thing. Yet it requires that there be some such concrete thing. Which or just what, among the innumerable divine possibilities, is a question of fact and entirely beyond the reach of abstract proof. So the contentions of the main parties to the dispute are reconciled. What a triumph for Anselm . . . ³

In short, if Kant could only have conceived of God as a two-sided coin, the logical-abstract necessity of one side *necessarily* implying the concrete existence of the other, he would have been saved the effort of an invalid criticism.

Malcolm, although not of Hartshorne's dipolar inclination, believes as well nevertheless that Kant's objections fail to reach the second of Anselm's formulations.

Let me summarize the proof. If God, a being a greater than which cannot be conceived, does not exist then He cannot *come* into existence. For if He did He would either have been *caused* to come into existence or have *happened* to come into existence, and in either case He would be a limited being, which be our conception of Him He is not. Since He cannot come into existence, if He does not exist His existence is impossible. If He does exist He cannot have come into existence (for the reasons given), nor can He cease to exist, for nothing could cause Him to cease to exist nor could it just happen that He ceased to exist. So if God exists His existence is necessary. Thus God's existence is either impossible or necessary. It can be the former only if the concept of such a being is self-contradictory or in some way logically absurd. Assuming that this is not so, it follows that He necessarily exists.

It may be helpful to express ourselves in the following way: to say, not that *omnipotence* is a property of God, but rather that *necessary omnipotence* is; and to say, not that *omniscience* is a property of God, but rather that *necessary omniscience* is. . . . *Necessary existence* is a property of God in the *same sense* that *necessary omnipotence* and *necessary omniscience* are His properties.⁴

Restating the proof in this fashion, Malcolm believes that he has escaped the indictment of Kant that Anselm was contending that, 'If God exists, then He necessarily exists', for if

³ Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago, Illinois: the University of Chicago Press, 1953), pages 104-105

⁴ Norman Malcolm, 'Ontological Arguments', *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. LXIX, 1960, pages 49-50. [Added 2020 04 27: the italicisation of some of the words and phrases within the quotation may have been added without citation by EWC when writing the essay, rather than being Malcolm's own.]

Kant had truly conceived of God as a being existing by logical necessity, how could he ever have suggested that the antecedent of his criticism 'If God exists . . . ' makes sense? Were it sensible, it would imply that God could possibly *not* exist, contrary to the definition of the term God itself. 'Existence' itself is not a perfection, therefore, but the 'logical necessity of existence' is. Or, as Raziel Abelson sums up Malcolm's position,

Now the subtle but, for Malcolm, crucial difference between the two proofs is the presence of 'necessarily' in the second and its absence from the first. This is important for him, because the concept of necessary existence is radically different from that of existence (which he interprets as contingent existence), and Kant's argument that existence is not a real predicate applies only to contingent existence. For while Kant was right in arguing that (contingent) existence is not a property, ergo not a perfection, he was not entitled to conclude that *necessary* existence is not a property, ergo not a perfection. According to Malcolm, necessary existence, unlike contingent existence, really is a property, and is a perfection of any being that has it, in the sense that a being that has necessary existence is superior to a being that has- contingent existence. Consequently, Anselm's second argument holds.⁵

III

Now let us turn to Kant (keeping in mind that any capsule summary of Kant's metaphysics is already a distortion) and see to what extent he would agree with the above criticisms, and what he did hold concerning Anselm's pet thesis.

To Kant, an individual's realm of phenomena (experience) consisted

- (a) of the *given* (that is, the experiential component not contributed by the mind of the individual); and
- (b) of the categories (concepts) within the mind of the individual which structured and gave objective order to the given. Categories were derived by the transcendental argument as those operators of the mind whose existence was required to explain the existence of order in the external phenomenal world.

An individual possesses, therefore, two types of knowledge: *a priori* (knowledge totally non-contingent upon experience); and *a posteriori* (knowledge derived from experience). *A priori* knowledge tells us nothing about the actual world of experience

⁵ Raziel Abelson, 'Not Necessarily', *The Philosophical Review*, Volume LXX, 1961, page 68.

but rather about the possibilities of that world, for it is true independently of experience. I may hold within my mind an idea of an entity conceivable as 'possibly' existing in the outer world of experience, but only 'possibly', for, to have certain knowledge of an actual external object existing, this element of the given must first conform with a category to give experience. Direct experience is the only justification for affirming an object to exist – and at precisely this point lies the source of man's difficulties with the notion of God.

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; 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.⁶

Granted a conception of God, Kant would not deny that such an entity could exist as possibility, but only that such an entity could not be said to exist *necessarily* in actuality. For 'necessary' is a term to be applied to the predicates of a 'judgment', not to the existence of a thing. Granted something to begin with, either a conception or a perception, one could speak of further attributes of the something as necessarily existing, but one could hardly attribute existence as necessary to the something with which you began, for this would be equivalent to taking the something as a contingent attribute of either (a) some other thing or (b) of itself. In the former case, you have but misplaced the problem one step backward, while in the latter, you are speaking of an absurdity.

Any judgment consists of a subject and predicate. To Kant, if the predicate adds something to the notion of the subject, the judgment is synthetic (for example, 'That brown chair is my own'); if it is incorporated in the subject, it is analytic (for example, 'That brown chair is brown'). If the judgment 'God exists' is analytic, then the predicate has added nothing to the subject, and

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Transcendental Dialectic, Book II, Chapter III, Section 4). Quotation reproduced from page 455 of the European Philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche, edited by Monroe C. Beardsley (New York, New York: The Modern Library, 1960).

... in that case either the thought, which is in us, is the thing itself, or we have presupposed an existence as belonging to the realm of the possible, and have then, on that pretext, inferred its existence from its internal possibility – which is nothing but a miserable tautology.⁷

If it is said that God is the only subject of an analytic judgement that, together with all His internal predicates of perfection, cannot be rejected without contradiction (that is, the *ens realissimum*), then He is inconceivable.

For I cannot form the least concept of a thing which, should it be rejected with all its predicates, leaves behind a contradiction; and in the absence of contradiction, I have, through pure a priori concepts alone, no criterion of impossibility.⁸

If, on the other hand, the judgment 'God exists' is synthetic, then one should be able to negate the predicate without contradicting the meaning of the subject; or, in more relevant terms, God – whether existing or not-existing – should retain his identity, and his perfection be unaltered thereby. Taking all of the predicates that constitute the perfection of God (that is, omnipotence, omniscience, etc.), we can show them to be related internally to the concept of God by the verb 'is': 'God is omnipotent', 'God is omniscient', etc.. But what does it mean to say that 'God is existing'? Clearly nothing more than 'God is'. 'Existence', consequently, cannot be used as a synthetic predicate, for "the real contains no more than the merely possible."⁹ Whether existing in reality or merely in possibility, God contains exactly the same internal predicates of perfection – and existence cannot be one of them.

If God, then, exists as an a priori concept, the most that we can say is that he exists as a possibility in the mind. Of his real existence, only experience can speak – and experience says nothing. The necessities of logic (scientific method), in short, operate on either the a priori or the a posteriori level; but a situation requiring the existence of an object in the latter from the existence of a concept in the former through a bridge of logical necessity is either contradictory, inconceivable, or both.

⁷ Ibid., pages 453-454.

⁸ Ibid., page 453

⁹ Ibid., page 454.

IV

Let us now examine the contentions of Hartshorne and Malcolm in the light of Kant's specific criticisms.

Hartshorne claims that Anselm proved an 'existence' necessary, not a particular divine 'actuality', and that these two are distinguishable in that the former is but an abstract container with the stipulation that at least one divine actuality exist within – not any particular given divine actuality. I claim this is nonsense.

(a) If we are involved in experience alone, which arises from category being applied to percept, then we may indeed conceive of God as being *a priori* either an abstract existence or a possible divine actuality, or both. But in either case, both sides of the two-sided coin are *a priori* — and cannot escape by logical necessity to experience. As Kant insists, there may indeed be a divine actuality corresponding to our 'possible' conception, but this can in no way be justified from experience.

(b) If Anselm indeed proved only 'that the class of divine actualities is not null', then I am justified in arbitrarily labeling any member of the non-null class by the symbol ϕ , for example, and making the assertion that ' ϕ exists'. But, as Kant clearly indicated, this statement can be meaningful only if you have already presupposed existence in the concept of ϕ itself, and ϕ , as a concept, is *a priori* and thus itself only a *possibility*! Hence, the most Anselm could have proved is 'that the (possible) class of divine actualities is not null', and thus absolutely nothing about an actual existent entity.

(c) Hartshorne's God is dipolar, which is no more than a technical way of ensuring that, whenever one gets in logical difficulties on one side of the pole, one can leap to the other and claim victory in avoiding contradiction! It calls forth little wonder on my part that one should be able to avoid contradiction in such a logical vacuum, for the concept of 'perfect being' is difficult enough as a conceptual problem without making it inherently illogical and impossible of conception. Kant's principal objection to Hartshorne, therefore, would most certainly not be against his logic, incredible as it may be, but rather against the conceivability of his dipolar universal waste-basket.

Malcolm, on the contrary, is a much less radical figure with a religious though not dipolar conception of God. In this he is perhaps close to Kant himself, but, again, Kant must ultimately object to Malcolm's ontological position on the grounds of inconceivability, for what can it possibly mean to posit a *thing* that exists by 'logical

necessity'? The judgment 'God necessarily exists' consists of a subject and predicate, as does the judgment 'God exists', and is open to the same Kantian criticism. If both subject and predicate cannot be denied without contradiction, then either (a) the subject is a thing of which 'I cannot form the least concept', or (b) it is a subject supposedly being defined into existence, which is quite a different mode of activity from logically proving its existence necessary. Either a priori or a posteriori, a part of a whole necessarily exists given the whole, but it makes no sense to speak of a non-contingent whole existing by logical necessity. That 'God exists' may be a judgement of fact. That 'God necessarily exists' – except God be contingent – is a judgement whose meaning is impossible of conception.

Barring a direct conceptual revelation, therefore, Kant seems still to stand atop the ontological mountain with Hartshorne and Malcolm in the valley below.