

## ON KANT'S TREATMENT OF THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT\*

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In the third chapter of the Transcendental Dialectic of his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant deals with the metaphysical pseudo-science of rational theology. The best known part of Kant's rational theology is its negative part: the famous refutation of the traditional scholastic rationalist proofs for the existence of God. Moses Mendelssohn called Kant's criticisms of the traditional metaphysical proofs for God's existence 'world crushing'. But it must be stated at the very outset that Kant's critique of speculative theism was not simply a series of attacks on the particular theistic proofs which had been offered by earlier philosophers. Its purpose was to show not only that no such proofs had in fact succeeded, but also that no speculative proofs of any kind for God's existence have any prospect of succeeding.

There are *three* classical *arguments* for the existence of God, namely, the ontological, the cosmological and the physico-theological (teleological). The ontological proof argues for the necessary existence of a supremely perfect being solely through its concepts. The cosmological argument argues for the necessary existence of a supremely perfect being from the contingent existence of a world in general. The physico-theological argument (also called argument from design) is based on the determinate experience of the world as having an orderly constitution, from which it infers the existence of 'an author of nature'. Of all the proofs Kant considers the ontological proof pivotal, for the other proofs, he thinks, rely tacitly on this proof.

The object of the present paper is to consider Kant's treatment of the ontological argument. It consists of four sections. In the first section, formulations of the ontological argument as given by St. Anselm and Descartes are stated in brief. In the second section, the arguments offered by Kant against the ontological argument are explained. In the third section, I intend to consider one of the objections of Shaffer against Kant's view and show that this objection is due to complete misunderstanding of Kant. And in the concluding section of my paper, I make a few comments on the connection between Kant's theory of knowledge and his critique of the ontological argument.

### I

The idea of God is the idea of an all-perfect reality (*ens realissimum*) who possesses all positive attributes in their superlative degree. Keeping this idea of God in mind Anselm's ontological argument<sup>1</sup> could be roughly formulated as follows:

By definition God is "the Being than which nothing greater can be conceived."

A Being who exists not merely in the understanding but also in the reality is greater than a being who exists only in the understanding.

Since a being greater than the greatest cannot be conceived, therefore, if God exists in the understanding, He must exist in reality as well.

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God does exist in the understanding.

So, it follows that God exists in reality as well.

In modern times Descartes reformulated the argument. Descartes' formulation of the argument in *Meditation V* could be stated as follows:

God is the Being that possesses all reality, the absolutely perfect Being.

"Existence is a perfection"<sup>2</sup> which means that existence is an attribute.

Therefore, the absolutely perfect being must possess the attribute of existence, i.e. God necessarily exists.

From Descartes' argument it is quite clear that, according to him, existence must be included among the defining properties of God. Descartes further says just as it follows from the very nature of a triangle that the sum of its three angles equals to two right angles, so it follows from the nature of God that He exists.<sup>3</sup> It is as much a contradiction to say that God does not exist as it is to claim that the sum of three angles of a triangle is not equal to two right angles. God's existence is *necessary* existence.

## II

Kant's criticisms of the ontological argument are primarily directed against Descartes' view. For Kant, the idea God (or, *ens realissimum*) is an idea of Reason. Its objective reality is by no means proved by the mere fact that reason requires it.<sup>4</sup> Kant's criticisms of the ontological argument are embodied in section IV of chapter III of his *Transcendental Dialectic*. Kant has put forward a number of objections which are as follows:

1. The concept of an unconditionally necessary being is unintelligible.
2. All existential propositions, if considered analytic, are 'miserable tautologies', and if considered synthetic, can be denied without any contradiction. Hence they can never assert with significance and at the same time with necessity, the actual existence of anything, and a fortiori, of God.
3. Existence is not a real i.e. an additive predicate.

Let us explain these objections one by one:

### **Kant's first objection:**

This objection is put forward by Kant from A593 = B621 to A596 = B624 of the *Critique*. Kant claims that the so-called absolutely necessary being cannot even be intelligibly thought or conceived, far less proved to be existent. This being, even though it can be verbally defined as the being the non-existence of which is inconceivable, still remains unintelligible. The reason of the unintelligibility, according to Kant, is that the conditions which make it absolutely necessary cannot be spelt out: "...this yields no insight into the conditions which make it necessary to regard the non-existence of a thing as absolutely unthinkable."<sup>5</sup> What does it mean to say that something exists necessarily? What are we to understand by a being that necessarily exists? What makes the non-existence of such a being impossible? If we cannot answer these questions, then we

cannot give any meaning to the concept of an absolutely necessary being. And this is precisely what we cannot do, Kant thinks.

According to Kant, the attempt to clarify the concept of the absolutely necessary being by the use of the necessary judgments of geometry as examples of necessity is futile. Kant observes that these examples concern, not the necessary existence of things, but only the necessity of judgments. But the unconditioned necessity of judgments is not the same as the unconditioned or absolute necessity of things. The necessity of judgments is hypothetical, while that of things is categorical. As Kant puts it : “The absolute necessity of the judgment is only a conditioned necessity of the thing or of the predicate in the judgment.”<sup>6</sup> For example, the judgment ‘every triangle has three angles’ does not declare that three angles are unconditionally necessary, but only that under the condition that there is a *triangle*, there necessarily will also be *three angles*. Thus there would be a contradiction if we retain the subject triangle, but reject the predicate three angled, but there would be no contradiction if we reject the triangle along with the predicate. As Kant puts it:

“If, in an identical proposition, I reject the predicate while retaining the subject, contradiction results; and I, therefore, say that the former necessarily belongs to the latter. But if we reject subject and predicate alike, there is no contradiction; for nothing is then left that can be contradicted.”<sup>7</sup>

Kant holds that it would be a contradiction to deny omnipotence to God. For omnipotence is included in the concept of an Infinite Being. But no contradiction arises if we deny the existence of God, the Infinite Being, together with all His Divine attributes, such as omnipotence. So Kant’s point is that the hypothetical necessity of the judgment cannot explain the absolute or categorical necessity of a thing, even if it is God. So the concept of the absolutely necessary being remains unintelligible.

### **Kant’s second objection:**

It might be argued by the supporters of the ontological argument that the concept of God is a unique idea. It is the concept of an *ens realissimum*, the all perfect reality (in this respect it is unlike triangles or any other members of the class of possibly existing things) and all reality must include existence; it follows that we still cannot deny the existence of such infinite being without contradiction. Consequently, *ens realissimum*, or God, is to be admitted as necessarily existent. Against this argument Kant makes the following objection:<sup>8</sup>

If we say of a thing that it exists, what kind of judgment have we set forth? It may be either analytic or synthetic. If it is an analytic judgment, its predicate would not add anything to its subject, i.e. to the concept of the thing whose existence is asserted. In that case, either it is the subject concept itself whose existence is being asserted, not of any concrete thing, or otherwise we have included in the subject-concept merely the notion of possible existence, which is then repeated in the predicate, so that the proposition becomes a *miserable tautology*. On the other hand, if the existential proposition ‘it exists’ is synthetic (as Kant indeed believes all existential propositions must be) then it can obviously be denied without contradiction. For it is an essential feature of synthetic propositions, as opposed to analytic propositions, that they can be

denied without contradiction. Hence in that case it cannot be considered as asserting *necessary* existence.

### **Kant's third objection:**

The third objection urged by Kant against the ontological argument, namely, that existence is not a real predicate, is the most celebrated in the history of the ontological argument. The famous passage (A599 = B627) in the *Critique* is often quoted by the critics to determine whether, for Kant, existence is a real predicate, and if it is not, then what would be its actual status.

In the above-mentioned passage and also in the subsequent two passages (A600 = B628, and A601 = B629) Kant has made a number of points. To begin with, he distinguishes between logical predicate and real predicate. Kant means by a logical predicate the grammatical predicate, any expression that grammatically occupies the position of the predicate of a categorical proposition. Kant says: Anything we please can be made to serve as a logical predicate; the subject can even be predicated of itself...<sup>9</sup> For Kant, a logical predicate is determined by its form, and by it alone. The real predicates are those that add something to the concept of the subject. A real predicate represents a property that things can have or not have. Since not everything that can be predicated of a thing in a judgment is a property of that thing, not every logical predicate is also a real one.

Kant maintains that "Being" is "obviously not a real predicate"; for "it is not a concept of something that could be added to the concept of a thing."<sup>10</sup> Kant explains this by saying that logically it is merely the copula of a judgment. This means that the verb "to be" does not add any new predicate but merely connects the predicate-concept with the subject-concept, e.g., in the proposition 'God is omnipotent'. Moreover, if we take the subject-concept (God) with all its predicates (among which is omnipotence) and say, "God is", or "there is a God" the verb "to be" does not add any new predicate to the subject-concept. It merely posits the subject "God" with all its properties "as being an *object* that stands in relation to my *concept*."<sup>11</sup>

Let us take an example to make Kant's point more clear. If we say a horse has four legs, a tail, and hoofs, we are attributing properties to the horse; but if we go on to say that the horse *exists*, we are not adding another property. We are saying that the thing we conceived as having these properties also *exists*. We are not adding to our concept of the thing. We are asserting a relation between the concept and the world.

To show that existence does not add to the concept of a thing Kant points out that a concept and its corresponding object that exists in reality have the same content. In other words, the thought or concept of a thing is not affected by any consideration of whether a thing corresponding to the concept exists or not. In Kant's famous example, there can be no difference in the contents of the concepts of hundred merely possible thalers and one hundred real thalers. The thought of 100 real thalers is no different *qua thought*, from the thought of 100 possible i.e. non-existent ones. 100 real thalers do not contain a single coin more than the hundred possible that is expressed by the concept.

Otherwise, i.e. if the object contains more than the concept, the concept cannot be said to be the adequate or exact concept of that object.<sup>12</sup>

*The above objections have been stated by Kant in a different way also.*

If we think in a thing every kind of reality except one, the missing reality is not added to the concept of the thing by the affirmation that the defective thing exists. On the contrary, the thing exists, if at all, with the same defect as that thought in its concept. For otherwise, not that which was thought, but something different, exists. Now if we think a being as the supreme reality, without any defect, the question still remains whether this being exists or not. For although nothing may be lacking in the possible real content of our concept, there is a defect in its relation to our state of knowledge, that is, we are ignorant whether the knowledge of the object is also possible *a posteriori*. “And here we find the source of our present difficulty,”<sup>13</sup> says Kant. He explains the point as follows:

If we were concerned with an object of sense only, we could not confuse the concept with the existence of a thing. For the concept only enables us to think an object as conforming to the general conditions of experience, whereas in thinking of the existence of the object we think it as contained in the sphere of actual experience. This connection with actual experience does not, however, enlarge (add to) the concept; “all that has happened is that our thought has thereby obtained an additional *possible perception*.”<sup>14</sup> If we are to assert the existence of a sensible object, it must be either itself actually perceived or be connected by empirical laws with what is actually perceived. It is not, therefore, astonishing that if we seek to think existence through the pure category alone, we shall not obtain a single criterion by which to distinguish it from mere possibility.

The kernel of Kant’s contention is that the ontological argument which proceeds from the mere concept of God to the existence thereof is an example of a transcendental hypostatization under the influence of dialectical illusion.

### III

Jerome Shaffer<sup>15</sup> has objected to Kant’s arguments against the ontological proof on two grounds:

- a) Kant’s view involves self-contradiction.
- b) Kant’s view gives us an incomplete picture of predication.

I shall confine myself only to Shaffer’s first objection against Kant i.e. the charge of inconsistency, which, as everyone will admit, is a more a serious charge than the charge of incompleteness. Let us see how Shaffer makes out his case.

According to Kant, being or existence is not a real predicate since it adds nothing to the concept of the subject. But Kant also holds, Shaffer points out, that all existential propositions, e.g. ‘this or that thing exists’, are synthetic. Shaffer then refers to Kant’s remarks in the *IV<sup>th</sup>* section of the Introduction of his *Critique*, where he says : “A synthetic proposition adds to the concept of the subject a predicate which has not been in any wise thought in it, and which no analysis could possibly extract from it...”<sup>16</sup>

Shaffer now argues that if we accept Kant's contention that existential propositions are *always* synthetic, then we are to say that ...exists'' must be a predicate which adds to the concept of the subject, in short, a "real" predicate...."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Kant's position is self-contradictory.

Shaffer's objection to Kant's view, stated above, can be paraphrased thus:

1. All existential propositions are synthetic.
2. All synthetic propositions are ampliative, i.e. their predicates add something to their subject concepts.
3. The concept of existence (which is used in the predicate of an existential proposition) is not additive.
4. Therefore, there is inconsistency in the set of propositions (i), (ii), & (iii)

It seems to me that Shaffer's charge of inconsistency is based upon a complete misunderstanding of Kant. Against Shaffer, I have two points to make.

In the first place, from what Shaffer says, it seems to me, he is working on the presupposition that, for Kant, all judgments are of the subject-predicate form. But this presupposition, made by Shaffer as well as by many eminent philosophers like Quine and Ayer, I think, is wrong. In order to find out wherein lies the mistake, let us see how Kant introduces the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments. Kant says:

"In all judgments in which the relation of a subject to a predicate is thought (I take into consideration affirmative judgments only, the subsequent application to negative judgments being easily made) the relation is possible in two ways. Either the predicate B belongs to the subject A, as something covertly contained in the concept A; or B lies outside the concept A, although it does indeed stand in connection with it. In the one case I entitle the judgment analytic, in the other synthetic."<sup>18</sup>

Now there is some doubt about the force of the relative clause in the first sentence of the passage: "In all judgments in which the relation of a subject to the predicate is thought." Does it give a description of all judgments as such, or does it mark off a species of judgments from judgments in general? If the former, then Kant thought that all judgments 'think the relation of a subject to a predicate,' and intended his division to *all* judgments. This is the interpretation upon which Shaffer's criticism is grounded. But, as pointed out by Robinson,<sup>19</sup> and quite rightly I think, in the passage in question Kant intended to mark off a species of judgments from judgments in general, and to divide only this species.<sup>20</sup> That, for Kant, not all judgments are of the subject-predicate form (i.e. attribute-ascriptive) becomes quite clear from his famous doctrine that existence is not a real predicate, which obviously implies that the judgment 'God exists' is not in subject-predicate form, and therefore some judgments do not 'think the relation of a subject to a predicate'. So when Kant introduces the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments, the distinction is to be understood only by reference to a species of judgment, i.e. all non-repetitive, affirmative, attribute-ascriptive judgments. In such kinds of judgments only those in which the predicate concept adds to the subject concept are to be regarded as synthetic. If we adopt this interpretation it is quite easy to see where Shaffer commits the mistake.

In our paraphrase of Shaffer's argument, the first proposition, viz. that all existential propositions are synthetic, is not questionable (because this is what Kant really says), but the reason given by Shaffer for its syntheticity does not correctly represent Kant's view. To this I will turn a little later.

As to the second proposition, namely, that all synthetic propositions are ampliative i.e. add to the concept of the subject a predicate, Shaffer cites as evidence what Kant says in B11. But Dryer<sup>21</sup> points out that Kant's considered view is that not all synthetic judgments are ampliative, attribute-ascriptive judgments. For, he argues that a negative synthetic judgment does not serve to increase knowledge, but to ward off error. To quote Kant : In respect to the content of our knowledge in general, which is either extended or limited by a judgment, the task peculiar to negative judgments is that of rejecting error."<sup>22</sup> Let us consider the judgment 'This table is not brown'. This negative synthetic judgment does not give us any information about the actual colour of the table. It is an error-preventive judgment. The purpose of this judgment is to prevent the mistake that this table is brown. From this it is quite clear that what Kant says in B11 cannot be cited as evidence that, according to Kant, all synthetic judgments are ampliative, for he is there speaking only of affirmative judgments. If that be so, the charge of inconsistency does not hold good.

Secondly, when Shaffer interprets Kant's thesis, namely, that all existential propositions are synthetic, he interprets it to mean that their predicate-concepts add to their subject-concepts, as all synthetic propositions do. This, he thinks, contradicts Kant's assertion that existence is not a real predicate which is added to the concept of the subject and enlarges it. Shaffer's mistake here is this: He appeals only to what Robinson calls Kant's 'containment-criterion' and completely overlooks another principle of classification given by Kant to distinguish between analytic and synthetic judgments. In the Prolegomena Kant says, "All analytic judgments rely wholly on the principle of contradiction."<sup>23</sup> This is what Robinson calls Kant's 'contradiction-criterion'. According to this criterion, a judgment is analytic if its denial is self-contradictory or, to put it in a different way, an analytic judgment is that which has a 'self-contradictory contradictory'. A synthetic judgment, on the other hand, is that the denial of which is not self-contradictory. When Kant says that existential propositions are synthetic, he does not apply the 'containment-criterion' at all, for they are not propositions of the subject-predicate form, i.e. attributive ascriptive propositions at all. All existential propositions are synthetic, according to him, because they can be denied without self-contradiction. If that be so, then there is no inconsistency in Kant's assertions that the concept of existence is not additive and that all existential propositions are synthetic. Therefore, Shaffer's criticism goes off the mark.

#### IV

Kant's rejection of the ontological argument as a proof for the existence of God, it seems to me, is intimately related to the most fundamental thesis of his epistemology – that all cognition requires both that an object should be given in intuition and thought through concepts. Now objects, for Kant, cannot be known unless they are given or presented in experience or in empirical intuition. Anything we think of is an object of thought. The object of thought simply because we are thinking of it is not thereby

guaranteed to be a real object. In order that it may be regarded as a real object, it must posit itself outside our thought and thereby show that it exists outside it. Now it can posit itself outside our thought only if it can posit itself in some extra-conceptual mode of apprehension called intuition. But the only intuition possible for us, human beings, is sensible intuition. Sensible intuition is either pure intuition or empirical intuition. Only space or time presents itself in pure intuition. The concept of God is not one whose object can be given to us in any intuition, whether pure or empirical. God cannot be presented in the pure intuition of space and time. For what is presented in space and time is limited, divisible and so on, but *ex hypothesi* God is unlimited. Again God cannot be presented in empirical intuition. For what is presented in empirical intuition is an empirical object, whereas God is supposed to be a trans-empirical object. So no genuine cognition of God is possible for us. The ontological argument ignores the fundamental distinction between forming a concept of an object and obtaining knowledge of the existence of an object answering to such a concept which, for us, always requires an intuition. The existence of an object can never be included in its concept, but must always be added to it through our intuition in which the object of the concept is given.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant concludes that no theoretically valid arguments for the existence of God can be given. The *Critique of Pure Reason*, did not, however, deny the existence of God; it only denied that we could know it. Kant says, “I have found it necessary to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*.”<sup>24</sup> Although theoretical reason can provide us with no cognition of God, no proofs of God’s existence, practical consideration can justify a belief, at least for the purpose of moral action, that there is a wise, benevolent and just Providence ordering the world. And this being is God.

God is not an object of knowledge, but of faith. It is a rational faith based on morality, and not upon sentiment. So, for Kant, religion is not the basis for morality, but rather the contrary; religion is a rational attitude based upon morality.

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