



Impossibility of an ontological proof of the existence of God

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Abstract:

Immanuel Kant's critique of the ontological argument centers on the assertion that existence is not a predicate or intrinsic attribute that can be ascribed to a being. He contends that while we can conceive of a being with all perfections, this conception does not necessitate its existence in reality. Kant argues that existence does not add to the essence of a being but merely indicates its occurrence in reality. Therefore, the ontological argument, which attempts to prove God's existence solely through the definition of a supremely perfect being, fails because it incorrectly assumes that existence is a defining predicate.

Keyword: God, Existence, Ontological argument.

I. Introduction:

According to Kant the third transcendental Idea of pure reason is the transcendental Ideal. It is the idea of the sum total of all possible predicates, containing a priori the data for all particular possibilities. That is to say, the mind, ascending the series of disjunctive syllogisms, finds the unconditioned condition of all particular predicates, each of which excludes contradictory or incompatible predicates, in the idea of an aggregate of all predicates. This is the idea of the aggregate or sum total of all possible perfections. But in as much as this sum total is thought of as the unconditioned condition of all particular perfections, it is thought of as the prototype of the latter from which the latter are derived and to which they approximate, and not as a mere abstract concept of the conflation, so to speak, of all particular, empirical perfections. Therefore, it is thought of as a real being, indeed as the supreme reality. The idea of the most perfect Being, the *Ens perfectissimum*, is also the idea of the most real Being the *Ens realissimum*. This Being cannot be thought of as a conflation, so it is empirical, limited and often mutually exclusive perfections. It must be thought of as the union of unlimited, pure perfections in one simple Being. Further, the unconditioned condition of all possible

limited perfection and reality is thought of as existing necessarily. We thus reach the idea of God as an individual, necessarily existing, eternal, simple and all-perfect supreme Being, which is not the aggregate of finite realities but their unconditioned condition and ultimate cause. And this idea forms the subject-matter of natural or philosophical theology.

Kant's views: Kant says, the procedure of pure reason seeks the unconditioned unity of all possible predicates. It cannot find this in the aggregate, in a literal sense, of empirical perfections, but has to pass beyond the conditioned. It thus objectifies the indeterminate goal of its search as the *Ens perfectissimum*. This is then hypostatized as the *Ens realissimum*, an individual being. Finally, it is personified as the God of theism. But by this procedure of objectification the reason passes beyond all possible experience. We have no right to assert that there is a Being which is *Ens perfectissimum* and *Ens realissimum*. There is an object corresponding to the representation of a sum total of all possible perfections.

Actually, on Kant's premises no proof of God's existence is possible. So, he tries to make this impossibility clear by showing that every line of proof is fallacious. According to Kant there are only three ways of proving God's existence in speculative metaphysics. Kant points out that, we can argue from experience or from mere concepts. When we argue from experience, we may argue from the definite experience of some particular things, or from the indefinite experience of anything. Thus, from the particular character of things found within experience, namely from their adaptation of certain ends, we can infer the existence of God as their cause. This is called the Physico-theological or teleological proof of God. Secondly from anything that is given in experience, and which is always conditioned, we may conclude the existence of God as unconditioned and necessary. This is called the cosmological proof. Thirdly, from the mere concept of God we may deduce a priori the existence of God. This is called the ontological proof.



According to Kant, the movement of the mind towards God in metaphysics is always guided by the Transcendental Ideal of pure reason, which is goal of its striving. And it is thus only proper to start with the a priori argument from the idea of God to the divine existence. Further, it is Kant's conviction that in order to reach God by the other lines of argument reason is forced in the end to make use of the ontological argument.

The ontological argument depends upon the distinction between existence and essence. Any ordinary person or thing, it is held, on the one hand exists, and on the other hand has certain qualities, which make up his or its 'essence'. Hamlet, though he does not exist, has a certain essence; he is melancholy, undecided, witty, etc. When we describe a person, the question whether he is real or imaginary remains open, however minute our description may be. This is expressed in scholastic language by saying that, in the case of any finite substance, its essence does not imply its existence. But in the case of God, defined as the most perfect Being. St. Anselm, followed by Descartes, maintains that essence does imply existence, on the ground that a Being who possesses all other perfections is better if He exists than if He does not, from which it follows that if He does not, He is not the best possible Being.

Leibniz neither wholly accepts nor wholly rejects this argument, it needs to be supplemented, so he says, by a proof that God, so defined, is possible He wrote out a proof that the idea of God is possible, which he showed to Spinoza when he saw him at the Hague. This proof defines God as the most perfect Being, i.e. as the subject of all perfections and a perfection is defined as a 'simple quality which is positive and absolute, expresses without any limits whatever it does express'. Leibniz proves that no two perfections, as above defined, can be conceived, a subject of all perfections, or most perfect being. Whence it follows also that He exists, for existence is among the number of the perfection.'

Kant encountered this argument by maintaining that that 'existence' is not a predicate. Kant discuss the ontological argument as follows: -

1. God, by definition, = the sum of all positive attributes.
2. Existence is a positive attribute.
3. Therefore, God exists.

Kant shows first of all that such a necessary being cannot really be conceived, and even if it could be conceived, its existence would not follow from the concept of it. When we think of anything as necessary, we have to think of

conditions which render It necessary. So, whatever is necessary is only under certain conditions. But when we remove all conditions and try to think of something as absolutely or unconditionally necessary, then we fail to secure any intelligible content. When all conditions are removed, as is required by the idea of the unconditioned we cannot then significantly think of anything as necessary.

The example of what is absolutely necessary are always judgements, such as those of Geometry. It is absolutely necessary, that a triangle should have three angles. "But the unconditioned necessity of judgements is not the same as an absolute necessity of things." The so-called absolute necessity of a proposition like "A triangle has three angles" is only a conditioned necessity. The above proposition does not say 'that three angles are there unconditionally, but that they exist only under the condition that a triangle exists. If we are to think of a triangle, we have to think of it as having three angles. That a triangle has three angles is an identical judgment. Of such a judgement we cannot reject the predicate while retaining the subject, because that would give rise to a contradiction. But if we reflect both the subject and predicate, then no contradiction would result, because nothing would be left to be contradicted. Although it is a contradiction to deny three angles of a triangle, it is no contradiction to deny the triangle together with its three angles. Similarly, "God is omnipotent" is an identical judgement and if we deny this, it would be a contradiction. This only means that if we once grant the existence of God, we cannot deny omnipotence of Him. But without any contradiction whatever we can deny the existence of God together with all His omnipotence. If existence formed part of the content of any concept, as the property of having three angles' forms part of the meaning of a triangle, the denial of existence in reference to such a concept would involve a contradiction. The idea of God does not include existence as an element, and so it is no contradiction to say that God does not exist.

"We have thus seen that if the predicate of a judgement is rejected together with the subject, no internal contradiction can result, and that this holds no matter what the predicate may be. The only way of evading this conclusion is to argue that there are subjects which cannot be removed and must always remain. That, however, would only be another way of saying that there are absolutely necessary subjects, and that is the very assumption which I have called in question, and the possibility of which the above argument professes to establish. 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". (N.K. Smith, Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, The Meremillan Press Ltd, London and Basingstoke, 1929, P.P-502-503)

It is however supposed that the idea of God conceived as ens realissimum (the highest reality) contains existence as an element in it, and so it would be a contradiction to deny the existence of God.

Against this view Kant contends that existence forms no part of the concept of any object whatever. No concept either gains or loses anything in concept by the addition or subtraction of existence. If there is any defect in any concept, then the appropriate object of that concept even when it exists, will equally show that defect, and will not be rid of it by the fact of its existence. If in any existing object we find any- thing more than what is contained in the concept of it, then we know without a doubt that the concept is of some other object and not of the object we are considering. This shows that existence does not add anything to the content of any idea. We find that a hundred possible thalers are not a whit less than hundred real thalers.

When existence adds nothing to, and so is not a part of, the content of an idea, it is clear that existence cannot be used as the predicate of an analytical proposition. There is no idea, by a mere examination of which we can say whether the object corresponding to it exists or not. All our existential judgements are synthetic and we can learn only from experience what things exist. We may possess the most perfect idea of the supreme being, but the question will still remain whether this being exists

It is quite plain that we cannot assert the existence of a sensible object from our mere idea of it. If we are to assert existence of it, it must be either itself actually perceived or be connected by empirical laws with what is actually perceived. Existence has no meaning for us, except in relation to possible experience. The concept of a supreme being is an idea of pure reason and is never presentable in experience. It is a mere idea, and it can never help us to know what exists or is even possible in fact. For such knowledge we must turn to experience.

The concept of a supreme being is in many respects a very useful idea; but just because it is a mere idea, it is altogether incapable, by itself alone, of enlarging our knowledge in regard to what exists. It is not even competent to enlighten us as to the possibility of any existence beyond that which is

known in and through experience. The analytic criterion of possibility, as consisting in the principle that bare positives (realities) give rise to no contradiction, cannot be denied to it. But since the realities are not given to us in their specific characters; since even if they were, we should still not be in a position to pass judgement, since the criterion of the possibility of synthetic knowledge is never to be looked for save in experience. to which the object of an idea cannot belong, the connection of all real properties in a thing is a synthesis, the possibility of which we are unable to determine a priori. And thus, the celebrated Leibniz is far from having succeeded in what he plumed himself on achieving the comprehension a priori of the possibility of this sublime ideal being." (N.K. Smith, Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, The Meremillan Press Ltd, London and Basingstoke, 1929, P-506)

"The attempt to establish the existence of a supreme being by means of the famous ontological argument of Descartes is therefore merely so much Labour and effort lost; we can no more extend our stock of (theoretical) insight by mere ideas, than a merchant can better his position by adding a few noughts to his cash account." (N.K. Smith Immanuel Kant & Critique of Pure Reason. The Meremillan Press Ltd. London and Basingstoke, 1929, P.P-506-507)

II. Conclusion:

The only unfortunate feature of Kant's refutation of the argument is his illustration of a hundred dollars, which is somewhat misleading. It is clear that, however a sum of a hundred dollars be defined, it would not be defined as including all the positive attributes there are. Therefore, the argument given would not apply to it even if it applied to God. No supporter of the ontological proof would claim that the existence of any-thing else save God alone followed from its idea. In general Kant meets the argument by denying the second premise and thus laying down a logical principle which is of great importance and is admitted by most modern logicians. It would, however, be wrong to ascribe originally to Kant in this: he had been anticipated by several writers.

Kant says it is proved that the concept of an absolutely necessary being is a concept of pure reason, that is, a mere idea the objective reality of which is very far from being proved by the fact that reason requires it. For the idea instructs us only in regard to a certain unattainable completeness, and so serves rather to limit the understanding than to extend it to new objects.



Kant is not saying that God does not exist. His position is that we do not know whether God exists or not and that it is impossible to derive this knowledge from the mere idea of God. We can never pass from the idea of a thing to its existence, because existence is not a part of the content of any idea.

Immanuel Kant's critique of the ontological argument centers on the assertion that existence is not a predicate or inherent attribute that can be ascribed to a being. He argues that merely defining a being as possessing all perfections does not entail its existence in reality. Therefore, according to Kant, the ontological argument fails to provide a valid proof for the existence of God.

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