

The Ontological Proof: Kant's Objections, Plantinga's Reply

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I. Introduction

Throughout Immanuel Kant's era, philosophers richly debated René Descartes's seventeenth-century reformulation of the ontological argument that Anselm originally advanced in the eleventh century.¹ In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant's seminal analysis of the capacity and limits of reason and the implications of each for the claims of metaphysics, Kant offers a direct response to Descartes's ontological proof, considering it against the backdrop of his own, broader line of argument in *CPR*. The result is perhaps the most destructive critique of the ontological argument ever produced.²

The aims of this essay are, first, to present Kant's criticism of the ontological argument (or better, arguments³—herein I use

¹ I am grateful to Gary Banham, Andrew Janiak, and two anonymous reviewers at *Kant Studies Online* for their feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

² Alvin Plantinga has called Kant's argument according to which existence is not a real property of things "[t]he most famous and important objection to the ontological argument" (Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 92). And, according to Kevin Harrelson, Kant's rejection of the ontological argument on epistemic grounds constitutes "the most thorough criticism of that argument in the modern period" (Harrelson, *The Ontological Argument from Descartes to Hegel*, 167).

³ Of course, there is not just *one* ontological argument—some authors have even themselves offered several ontological arguments. Anselm himself, argues Norman Malcolm, put forward two distinct ontological arguments. In *Proslogion II*, Anselm is said to have argued that existence increases a being's greatness; in *Proslogion III* Anselm purportedly argued that *necessary* existence, too, contributes to a being's greatness. Malcolm's argument has been controversial, however, and Charles Hartshorne has produced a formal, refined version of it (see Sobel, *Logic and Theism: Arguments For and Against Beliefs in God*, 81-82). In general, the phrase "the ontological argument" is best understood as a useful

“argument” or “proof” for short) with special attention to its historical context, and, second, to consider whether Kant’s criticism can withstand an important recent objection advanced by Alvin Plantinga. In Section II, I consider how Kant conceives of the ontological proof vis-à-vis the cosmological and physico-theological proofs, and I situate Kant’s criticism in a rich line of historical proofs and critiques.⁴ Section III presents and analyzes Kant’s criticism itself as discussed both in his pre-critical writings and in the section of *CPR* entitled “On the impossibility of an ontological proof of God’s existence.” The focus here is on Kant’s famous argument holding that we cannot legitimately predicate “existence” as, in Philip Rossi’s words, “a property that is included in the concept of any object.”⁵ In Section IV, I present and assess the argument underlying Plantinga’s charge of “irrelevance” against Kant’s criticism.

This paper has two main conclusions. First, Kant’s objection to the ontological proof on the ground that existence is not a real property was pathbreaking in Kant’s era and rightly remains highly influential today. Second, Sobel fails convincingly to show that what I call Plantinga’s “objection-from-irrelevance” is itself irrelevant to Kant’s criticism; however, Plantinga still

shorthand for a group of arguments designated “ontological” on account of their common character. Herein I am not weighing in on the validity of *all* versions of the ontological argument.

⁴ Of course, there are justifiable reasons that do not fall within the ambit of proofs proper to hold a number of beliefs, and many thinkers have plausibly argued that justified belief in God does not require acceptance of rigorous proofs. Clayton, for example, suggests that although “the framework of inference to the best explanation” is not a proof, it still provides good reason for belief (Clayton, p. xi, quoting Prevost, *Probability and Theistic Explanation*, 1990). Clayton characterizes Prevost’s endorsement of belief that is based on inference to the best explanation as “a persuasive argument” which supports moving away from proof-based belief (Clayton, xi).

⁵ Rossi, “Kant’s Philosophy of Religion,” Section 2.1. I find Rossi’s phrase elegant and use his formulation in this paper.

Gregory Robson, *The Ontological Proof: Kant’s Objections, Plantinga’s Reply*, KSO 2012: 122-171.

Posted August 26, 2012 www.kantstudiesonline.net
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must respond to some concerns discussed in the final section if his interesting objection is to succeed.⁶

II. Kant on the Ontological Argument: General and Historical Context

Kant on the Ontological Proof as One of Three Kinds of Proof of God's Existence

In *CPR*, Kant conceives of the ontological proof in relation to two other proofs of God's existence.⁷ He asserts that "[t]here are only three kinds of proof of the existence of God possible from speculative reason."⁸ The *physico-theological* proof (now called the proof from design or the

⁶ In what follows, I shall sometimes refer to the *Critique of Pure Reason* as "*CPR*", the *Nova Dilucidatio* as "*ND*", and *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* as "*OPA*".

⁷ Although the pre-critical Kant rejects Descartes's ontological argument on the ground that it invalidly takes existence as a predicate of (what we now call) possibilities, Kant's own pre-critical proof of God's existence holds God to be that which makes possible *possibility itself* (Cf. England, 53-4). As F. E. England notes: "The ultimate being itself cannot be regarded as possible, but is rather the *principium* of possibility" (54). Kant's treatment of the conditions of cognition in *CPR*, however, leaves him only able to accept that his pre-critical proof of the existence of God rationally warrants belief (*Glaube*) rather than yields *knowledge* (*Wissen*) of God's existence (see Chignell, 159-61, 169).

⁸ Kant, A591/B619. Four related points bear note. First, Kant says there are only three *kinds* of speculative proof – not only three proofs. Second, other authors have disputed Kant's claim that there neither are, nor can be, more than three kinds of proof for God's existence from speculative reason. See, e.g., Alvin Plantinga's argument according to which believing in other minds is rational, and believing that god exists is analogous to believing that other minds exist, so believing that god exists should be considered rational too (Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*). This argument does not seem to fit Kant's three-kind mold. Third, Kant later gives a proof for God's existence from *practical* (not theoretical) reason: this is his well-known moral argument for God's existence. Fourth, as Norman Kemp Smith writes in "Is Divine Existence Credible?":

Kant took it as a matter of common agreement that there is no immediate experience of the Divine, and that the existence of God must be established, if

teleological argument) begins with our determinate experience and “the special constitution of our world of sense known through it” and relies upon causal laws to identify a “highest cause outside the world.”⁹ The *cosmological proof* moves from the existence of non-necessary beings to the existence of a necessary being. And the *ontological proof* starts with abstraction from experience and infers “the existence of a highest cause entirely *a priori* from mere concepts.”¹⁰ As Chignell notes, this proof proceeds “from a conceptual ground (*Grund*) (i.e., the idea of a supremely perfect being) to its analytical result (i.e., the real existence of such a being).”¹¹ Kant, who in his pre-critical period groups the first proofs together under the heading “cosmological,”¹² holds that these speculative proofs all constitute, in Kevin Harrelson words, “an extension of reason beyond its rightful limits.”¹³

Let us turn now to how Kant conceived of the ontological proof. Kantian philosopher Michelle Grier offers a precise schematization of Kant’s essential formulation:

1. God, the *ens realissimum*, is the concept of a being that contains all reality/predicates.
2. Existence is a reality/predicate. [I prefer: real property/predicate.]

it is to be established at all, in and through inference, that is, in and through study of what is other than God. (Kemp Smith, 226.)

As an interesting aside, Kemp Smith held that immediate experience of the divine is possible, and increasingly so “under the discipline and through the way of life prescribed by religion in this or that of its great traditional forms” (Kemp Smith, 234). See also: Eric Watkins, “Kant on the Hiddenness of God” (133-148) and David Sussman, “Something to Love: Kant and the Faith of Reason” (255-290) in *Kant’s Moral Metaphysics*.

⁹ Kant, A591/B619.

¹⁰ Kant, A591/B619. Here Kant’s language presages his later treatment: he writes “*mere* concepts” (emphasis added) rather than just “concepts.”

¹¹ Chignell, 164.

¹² See Rossi, 6, discussing Kant’s analysis in *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*.

¹³ Harrelson, 167.

3. Therefore God exists.¹⁴

(Kant's own, detailed presentation of the ontological proof will be discussed in depth in part III.)

The ontological proof is, for Kant, especially important among the three proofs. For Kant believes that the cosmological and physico-theological proofs presuppose the ontological proof since these two proofs conclude that a necessary being must be a most real or most excellent being.¹⁵ The ontological proof also arguably includes the least amount of presuppositional baggage among the proofs: the only required presupposition is that all people have an *a priori* idea of God as something like an infinite substance. In one respect this makes the ontological proof more elegant and less prone to dispute than the other two proofs; the proof only requires proceeding from an *a priori* idea and reasoning logically, and there is no need to make empirical assertions that might prove highly contestable.¹⁶

*Situating Kant's Criticism of the Ontological Argument
Historically*

In putting forward his objections to the ontological proof, Kant is primarily targeting Descartes's revival of Anselm's proof in the *Fifth Meditation*. Nonetheless, I think that Kant had in mind at the time of his writing the broader line of ontological proofs that ran from Anselm to Leibniz. Kant was well

¹⁴ Grier, "Kant's Critique of Metaphysics," Section 5.1.

¹⁵ See: Reichenbach, "Cosmological Argument." See also: Grier, "Kant's Critique of Metaphysics." Grier writes:

Each, that is, argues that there is something that must exist with absolute necessity and concludes that this being is the *ens realissimum*. Because these proofs aim to identify the *ens realissimum* with the necessary being, and because the attempt to do this requires an *a priori* argument (it cannot be demonstrated empirically), Kant thinks that they are both (ultimately) mitigated by their reliance on the ontological proof (Grier, Section 5.2).

¹⁶ As noted previously, the other two proofs begin with empirical claims.

aware of Anselm's proof and Descartes's revival of it in modified form, and even mentioned Leibniz by name in his short section entitled "On the impossibility of an ontological proof of God's existence." It is important to understand the nature of the main proofs in this historical line so as to appreciate sufficiently the historical import of Kant's powerful critique.¹⁷ The same holds true for understanding the arguments advanced by a famous objector to Anselm's ontological argument (i.e., Gaunilo of Marmoutiers) and two key philosophers (i.e., Gassendi and Hume) who certain scholars have argued anticipated Kant's ontological criticisms. (Kant was also familiar with other pre-Cartesian ontological arguments in Latin, Christian, Arabic, and Medieval societies, but it would be outside the scope of this paper to discuss the nature of that familiarity.)

Anselm's Proof

In *Proslogion II*, St. Anselm succinctly states his famous ontological proof:

[S]urely that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind alone, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-can-be-thought. But this is obviously impossible. Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality.¹⁸

¹⁷ My aim in this section is to situate Kant's views of the ontological argument in terms of their import for *his* era. Only in a separate, far more elaborate analysis could one carry out the further task of tracing Kant's influence on the fields of logic and philosophy of religion up to the present day.

¹⁸ Anselm, 1965 (from Sobel, 59).

Anselm's argument is no doubt elegant: God is a being than which no greater can be thought. If this kind of being, although thought, is said not to exist, a greater being – one that exists – can still be thought. Consequently a being than which no greater can be thought exists.¹⁹

Descartes's Revival of Anselm's Proof

Descartes's reformulation of the Anselmian ontological argument was not only a pivotal contribution in the history of philosophy but also the main target of Kant's objections to the ontological proof in the first Critique. Descartes offers a minimalist proof that relies on the notion that all people have the idea of God (an innate, *a priori* idea for Descartes). He also considers the proposition "God does not exist" to be self-contradictory. In the *Fifth Meditation*, Descartes remarks:

[E]xistence can no more be separated from the essence of God than we can separate from the essence of a triangle that the sum of its three angles adds up to two right angles, or than we can separate the idea of a mountain from the idea of a valley.²⁰

Thus, since we have <God> (i.e., the *concept* "God") clearly and distinctly, we must also have <existence> (i.e., the *concept* existence). Therefore, according to Descartes, God must exist. Allen Wood nicely summarizes Descartes's position, according

¹⁹ I have cross-referenced my description here against Oppy's in "Ontological Arguments." The two are similar but not the same. I prefer the word "thought" to "conceived" since "thought" is closer to the translation of the *Proslogion II* on which I have relied.

²⁰ Descartes, 47. Kant will go on to consider this example (at least implicitly) in his section "On the impossibility of an ontological proof of God's existence."

to which the intellect may arrive at “a stock of certain knowledge” by intuiting directly, and *a priori*, a certain subset of essences or natures, such as God’s nature, which includes God’s existence.²¹

Let us delve more deeply into Descartes’s argument. Descartes thought that, just as <2> (the “idea of 2”, in his terminology) contains the property of evenness, so must <God> contain the property of existence. Since one understands <God> no less clearly and distinctly than one understands <2>, existence must be part of God’s essence.²² In the same way that we cannot think <2> without thinking <evenness>, we cannot think <God> without thinking <existence>. So doing would be contradictory. Thus, since we have <God>, then God must exist in reality. Consider that the proposition “God exists” is an *analytic* judgment for Descartes in the same way that the proposition “God is a necessary being” is analytic (to use Kant’s sense of “analytic” – Descartes did not of course label the judgment so). Removing <existence> from <God> is just as objectionable as removing <necessity> from <God>. Either move would lead one to think not of <God> but of a *different* idea.

There is ample textual support for the foregoing interpretation of Descartes’s proof. Let us first note Descartes’s understanding of “God”²³ as stated in the *Third Meditation* (a text in which Descartes offers a separate proof of God’s existence that we shall not consider herein): “By the name ‘God’ I understand an infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful substance, by which I myself and whatever

²¹ Wood, *Kant’s Rational Theology*, 101.

²² The two-fold criterion of clarity and distinctness was of course crucial both to Descartes’s evaluation of ideas and to rationalist philosophy more generally.

²³ Note the quotations around the word “God.” Some philosophers have considered God not to be susceptible of definition. For example, Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain, has written that: “there is no *definition* of God” (Maritain, 68; emphasis original).

else exists.”²⁴ Moreover, in the *Fifth Meditation*, Descartes asserts: “whenever I choose to think about the first and supreme being, and bring forth the idea of him ... I must necessarily credit him with *all* perfections.”²⁵ For among the “true ideas innate within me, the first and most important ... is the idea of God.”²⁶ Descartes connects the claim that certain ideas are innate with his previous claim that “God exists” is analytic. “I find the idea of him,” he explains, “that is, of a supremely perfect being, in myself, just as much as I find the idea of any shape [e.g., a triangle] or number.”²⁷ This point is crucial: Just as Descartes holds the idea of any shape or number both clearly and distinctly, he holds the idea that God exists both clearly and distinctly. Hence God must exist.

Two final points about Descartes’s ontological proof bear note. First, Descartes did of course think that <God> is an innate idea that can come only from God. But the origin of <God> is not essential to Descartes’s argument in the *Fifth Meditation*, and Kant grants that we have the idea of God. (Indeed, neither Kant’s treatment of Descartes’s proof in the *Fifth Meditation*, nor that proof itself, depends on the veracity of Descartes’s claim about the origin of one’s *a priori* idea of God.) Second, Descartes viewed <God> as the *sole* exception to the notion that no being exists essentially.²⁸ For Descartes, <existence> is a property that can legitimately be included in

²⁴ Descartes, 32.

²⁵ Descartes, 48. Emphasis added. This particular point calls to mind the Anselmian formulation.

²⁶ Descartes, 48.

²⁷ Descartes, 47. The bracketed clarification is mine.

²⁸ Let me offer a tentative observation here. On one hand, it can seem implausible *prima facie* to say that everything *except for God* in the entire (known or knowable) universe conforms to one set of rules about existence. On the other hand, if God exists and ever anything were to merit such an exception, it would be God. I take this to be a puzzling paradox.

the concept of an object, and God exists essentially whereas all other beings exist accidentally.²⁹

Leibniz's Refinement of Descartes's Proof

In the early eighteenth century, rationalist philosopher Gottfried Leibniz put forward a refinement of Descartes's ontological argument.³⁰ Leibniz contended that Descartes failed adequately to demonstrate (1) that his arguments were coherent and (2) that a supremely perfect being could possibly exist. Absent both demonstrations, said Leibniz, Descartes's ontological argument must fall short. Leibniz undertook then to argue that perfections are not analyzable and therefore it is impossible to demonstrate the incompatibility of perfections.³¹ After criticizing Descartes for begging the question whether God exists Leibniz went on, writes Philip Clayton, to offer "the simple but modally unimpeachable claim: if a necessary being is possible, then it exists."³² Clayton offers a tidy historical summary of Leibniz's position on the ontological argument:

The core of Leibniz's position on the ontological proof is that the concept of perfection is not in itself *sufficient* to prove the existence of God. The existence/perfection link does its real work only when Leibniz moves outward to develop the intuitions of the ontological proof into a systematic philosophy – and, in particular, when he adds the key contention that *existence adds to the perfection of something*.³³

²⁹ Discussion of Kant's treatment of the ontological argument in relation to Descartes's versus Baumgarten's formulations can be found in Harrelson, 171.

³⁰ Chignell nicely summarizes Leibniz's conception of God, as "the being whose thoughts are eternally focused on essences and who thus grounds all of the truths about these essences and the relations between them." Chignell, 182.

³¹ Up to this point in the paragraph I follow Oppy's analysis in "Ontological Arguments." See also: Sobel, 32-33.

³² Clayton, 193.

³³ Clayton, 192-193. Emphasis original.

We will see that Kant's criticism of the claim that existence adds to the perfection or greatness of something applies not only to Descartes's version of the ontological argument but to Leibniz's version as well.³⁴ Kant's argument that existence is not a real property applies to Descartes's formulation of the ontological proof, while the limits Kant sets on the human capacity for acquiring metaphysical knowledge entail that the kind of metaphysics advanced by rationalists in general cannot succeed without some support from empirical inquiry proper.³⁵ Left to their own devices, rationalist metaphysicians, says Kant, too readily go beyond the bounds of possible experience if constrained only by the principle of non-contradiction.³⁶

*Note on Theistic and Epistemological Patterns
through Kant's Era*

At this juncture it is worth noting an illuminating insight from Philip Clayton into the broader intellectual patterns (e.g., theological, epistemological) of Kant's time.³⁷ In *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*, Clayton says that belief in the existence of God and belief in the capacity of human beings to cognize things-in-themselves were similarly taken for granted during Scholasticism.³⁸ The former historical

³⁴ According to Sobel, Leibniz counts "existence" as a predicate, but more like the predicate "goodness"—that is, "existence" for Leibniz is a "predicate different in kind from those that constitute the natures of existent things on which natures it supervenes" (Sobel, 68).

³⁵ Kant's distinction between real and logical possibility causes him to distance himself from Leibniz's account. See Chignell, 160.

³⁶ Byrne summarizes an important related argument by Kant:

The principle of sufficient reason plays a vital role in the management of reason's tasks, but it is not an ontological principle – no more is the principle of design an ontological principle. If they were ontological principles, we would have the heteronomy and not the autonomy of reason (Byrne, 21).

³⁷ See: Clayton, pp. 263-264.

³⁸ To be sure, this claim is not uncontroversial.

pattern, says Clayton, obtained until and through the time of Leibniz; the latter historical pattern obtained up to and through the time of Descartes on the rationalist side, and Locke on the empiricist side. Only after the parallel loss of confidence in theistic belief, on the one hand, and epistemological realism, on the other, did “the arguments’ inability to produce such [theistic and epistemological] intuitions become obvious.”³⁹ Many such hitherto taken-for-granted background assumptions were eventually subjected to critical scrutiny, but they often appeared curious or questionable only in retrospect. Now it seems clear that Kant’s appraisal of the limits of reason, especially as regards speculative proofs of God’s existence, played no small role on both sides of this striking epistemological shift in the history of philosophy. Kant’s criticisms of the ontological proof should be understood, I suggest, as both arising under and giving impetus to this remarkable historical shift.⁴⁰

*Gaunilo’s Objection and Hume and
Gassendi’s Anticipations*

By Kant’s lifetime in eighteenth-century Prussia, there had arisen a rich history not only of ontological proofs but also of objections to the ontological proof. One of the most famous objections to Anselm’s ontological argument came from Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, a contemporary of Anselm’s. Gaunilo offered a counterargument to Anselm’s proof that relied on using parallel analysis to produce absurd results.⁴¹ He famously argued that it is erroneous to assume the

³⁹ Clayton, 264.

⁴⁰ Notably, Kant levels criticism against the ontological argument in its eighteenth century form, and criticism against speculative theology as discussed by Baumgarten, Eberhard, and Wolffe. His criticism is in each case historically located. See Harrelson, 182 (esp. para. 2).

⁴¹ Or so it seems: Alvin Plantinga has pointed out that while Gaunilo’s argument was about whether such an island exists *in fact*, an argument truly parallel to

existence of a most perfect island, since ascribing existence to a most perfect island does not describe any existing island. Gaunilo's argument has since received a good deal of attention in the literature and continues to generate scholarly interest.⁴²

Kant's seminal critiques of the ontological proof not only constitute an important part of a long line of criticism that began in Gaunilo's era, but also fall within the broader context of an intellectual history that to some degree anticipated them. As Peter Millican argues, both Pierre Gassendi (in *Fifth Set of Objections*⁴³) and David Hume (in *A Treatise of Human Nature*) anticipated Kant's landmark argument according to which it is illegitimate to include the property "existence" in the concept of any object.⁴⁴ We shall briefly consider Hume in particular, as other scholars (e.g., Barry Miller) have likewise emphasized the fairly close connection between Kant's views on existence and Hume's position in *A Treatise on Human Nature*. In *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Hume says that the "the idea of existence must either [1] be derived from a distinct impression, conjoined with every perception or object of our thought, or ... [2] be the very same with the idea of the perception or object."⁴⁵ Hume thinks, however, that we lack good reason to believe [1], and

Anselm's would need to be about whether a perfect island can be *conceived* to exist. Plantinga goes on to consider a revised version of Gaunilo's argument that posits the existence of an island than which no greater island can be conceived. Plantinga argues that "[t]he qualities that make for greatness in islands—number of palm trees, amount and quality of coconuts, for example—most of these qualities have no *intrinsic maximum*" (Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 91; emphasis original). The fact that these qualities lack an intrinsic maximum makes the idea of a greatest conceivable island incoherent or inconsistent, which suggests to Plantinga that this revised version of Gaunilo's argument fails to refute Anselm's ontological argument.

⁴² See, e.g.: Speaks, "Gaunilo's reply to Anselm." Of particular interest might be Section 3: "A Disanalogy between The Greatest Island and the Greatest Being."

⁴³ These objections were directed toward Descartes's *Meditations*. Kant himself probably had not read Gassendi (see Harrelson, 172).

⁴⁴ Millican, 443, fn. 12.

⁴⁵ Hume, Book I, Part II, Section VI. Miller provides an historical overview of key views on existence held by various philosophers, and he includes this excerpt from Hume (Miller, 7). The numbering is mine.

that <existence> itself does not seem to derive from any distinct idea. Interestingly, for Hume <existence> seems to be the same as an idea of perception, such that it adds nothing to the object of that idea.⁴⁶ This Humean view is, then, remarkably similar to Kant's view that existence is not a real property of the concept of any object.⁴⁷ Having considered Kant's criticism of the ontological proof in its general and historical context, we may now turn to Kant's groundbreaking analysis itself.

III. Kant's Objections to the Ontological Argument

Kant's Analysis in "On the impossibility of an ontological proof of God's existence."

In Section III, we shall consider Kant's criticisms of the ontological argument from his section entitled "On the impossibility of an ontological proof of God's existence," and place special emphasis on his famous existential objection.⁴⁸ Four points bear note before we consider the text directly. First, Kant willingly grants the Cartesian background assumption that we have the concept of God *a priori*. This enables him to engage Descartes's ontological proof on its own terms rather than (far less interestingly) simply denying one of its premises. Second, as Harrelson emphasizes, the fame of Kant's criticism of the ontological argument, including his denial of the notion that existence is a real predicate, owes largely to his having embedded that criticism in a novel theory of human cognition that disallows in principle, on account of human epistemic limi-

⁴⁶ Miller, 7. My wording in this and the previous sentence is close to that of the original article; using much different language here might paint an obfuscatory picture.

⁴⁷ Miller suggests an "alignment" between Kant's and Hume's views on existence; see Miller, 7-8.

⁴⁸ Kant, A592/B620. By Kant's "existential objection" I refer to his objection according to which existence is not a real property that can be legitimately added to the concept of things.

tation, any demonstration of God's necessary existence based on our having <God>.⁴⁹ Third, immediately preceding this part of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant emphasizes that the ontological proof derives from "mere concepts."⁵⁰ Contra the cosmological and physico-theological arguments, it does not proceed on the basis of (often disputable) empirical claims. Finally, as Chignell, Wood, et al. maintain, "[e]very concept for Kant is made up of certain 'marks' or 'characteristics,' consisting in various realities and their negations"—marks of "body," for example, include impenetrability, extension, and shape.⁵¹

Before turning to Kant's analysis of the ontological argument in *CPR*, some key ways in which Kant's pre-critical writings – especially the *Nova Dilucidatio (ND)* (1755) and *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God (OPA)* (1763) – prefigured his analysis in *CPR* bear emphasis. Under the heavy influence of the rationalists Leibniz and Wolff, the pre-critical Kant largely accepts their metaphysics and their optimism about the prospect of rationally proving the existence of God.⁵² As to the ontological proof in particular, Kant offers "his most focused [pre-critical] treatment of ... arguments for the existence of God" in the *OPA*, where he already argues that existence cannot be predicated as a property included in a given concept, whether the concept be of God or any other being.⁵³ The pre-critical Kant further maintains, (this time in *ND*), that (1) "[t]he concept of the subject only contains predicates of possibility" and (2) "one does not examine the concept of the subject in order to demonstrate the correctness of the proposition about the existence of such a thing."⁵⁴ Consider Kant's example of Julius

⁴⁹ Harrelson, 168, 187.

⁵⁰ Kant, A591/B619.

⁵¹ Wood, 103 (closely paraphrased). See also: Chignell, 162 (including fn. 12).

⁵² Throughout this paragraph I follow Rossi, esp. 4-6, and Kant's own works as noted.

⁵³ Rossi, 5.

⁵⁴ Kant, *OPA* 2:73/Walford (ed.), 118.

Caesar: If you list all of Caesar's predicates including space and time, Caesar must *either* (a) exist with all of them (i.e., extension) or (b) simply not exist.⁵⁵ Thus, the pre-critical Kant already believes that existence cannot legitimately serve as a predicate. In F. E. England's words, Kant holds that:

If the proposition 'this thing exists' be analytical, no addition is made to the subject of one's thought by the affirmation of existence; the concept and the thing are the same. And if ... an existential proposition must be synthetic, then how can it be maintained that the predicate of existence cannot be denied without contradiction?⁵⁶

Kant also draws upon Crusius in his pre-critical writings in order to distinguish the cause of thought from the cause of existence. Kant believes that *considering* the nonexistence of God to be impossible is a matter of our capacity to *think* that claim, and not a claim about why God must actually exist. He accordingly holds that Descartes's idea "God" only allows us *to know* of God's existence, not to prove God's existence in reality.⁵⁷ The pre-critical Kant was importantly influenced by Crusius's *Sketch* in particular, and by the end of the pre-critical period had arrived at much of the argument he would later deploy in *CPR*.⁵⁸ For example, in *OPA* Kant already holds that a proof of the existence of God must be both synthetic – not analytic – and *a priori*.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Kant, *OPA* 2:72/Walford (ed.), 117. In the secondary literature see, e.g., Chignell, 166-67.

⁵⁶ England, 123.

⁵⁷ Throughout this paragraph I draw gratefully on Harrelson, 170.

⁵⁸ Kant's initial engagement of the ontological argument begins with his consideration of Baumgarten's and Crusius's treatments of a priori proofs; Kant sides with Crusius (See Harrelson, 167).

⁵⁹ Here I follow Chignell, 164, and then Harrelson, 169-96. In *OPA*, Kant sets out to argue, not that God must exist given our concept of God, but rather that certain *a priori* truths can only be true given the existence of God.

Moreover, in the *Nova Dilucidatio* – a text with interesting parallels to Arnauld’s discourses with Descartes on the ontological argument⁶⁰ – the pre-critical Kant holds that “[i]t is impossible that anything should have the reason of its own existence in itself.”⁶¹ The ground of any entity’s existence must therefore be distinct from itself.⁶² The pre-critical Kant adopts a modified version of the rationalist principle of sufficient reason, arguing not that there are no brute facts, but rather that, as Chignell writes, “fundamental modal truths have what we now call truthmakers – i.e., actual, concrete particulars that ground or explain their truth.”⁶³ For Kant, *actual* states of affairs serve as the basis, or grounding, of such modal truths.

Let us turn now to Kant’s analysis in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. At the beginning of his section on the ontological argument, Kant points out that “reason needs” the “mere idea” of an absolutely necessary being, but this need is a function more of providing limits for the understanding than of providing it with new objects.⁶⁴ Reason is inherently apt to go beyond its legitimate bounds and is better understood as regulative rather than constitutive. For example, possessing the concept of an absolutely necessary being is no guarantee that an object corresponds to that concept, even though human reasoners often assume it is. Simply possessing a nominal definition of the concept of an absolutely necessary being provides no insight into the crucial question, writes Kant, of “whether or not through this concept we are thinking anything at all.”⁶⁵ Analo-

⁶⁰ See Harrelson, 192, fn. 4, where he notes that Kant’s argument is strikingly similar to Arnauld’s discussion according to which causes must be prior to their effects such that it is absurd to think that a being has caused itself; after all, that would require thinking that the being somehow existed before it was given existence.

⁶¹ *ND*, 223 (Proposition VI).

⁶² Harrelson, 169.

⁶³ Chignell 157-59 (quoted material from 158); the following sentence draws on Chignell, 159.

⁶⁴ Kant, A591-93/B619-21. Here I both quote and paraphrase Kant.

⁶⁵ Kant, A593/B621.

gously, we do not simply *assume* that a triangle exists and then conclude therefrom that the triangle's three angles exist in reality rather than just in the understanding. Rather, writes Kant, we say "that under the condition that a triangle exists (is given), three angles also exist (in it) necessarily."⁶⁶ The existence of the three angles depends in the first place on the existence of the triangle, and the said triangle has merely been *assumed* to exist, not actually shown to exist. Norman Kemp Smith nicely summarizes Kant's point: "If there be any such thing as a triangle, the assertion that it has three angles will follow with absolute necessity; but the existence of a triangle or even of space in general is contingent."⁶⁷ Kant believes that the ontological argument conflates logically necessary judgments with conditioned, contingent reality.⁶⁸

Kant subsequently argues in this section that "canceling" (i.e., negating) a predicate in an analytic judgment while keeping the subject gives rise to a contradiction. For example, canceling the predicate in the proposition "triangles have three angles" yields the proposition "triangles do *not* have three angles."⁶⁹ (Here Kant seems to be engaging Descartes's previously mentioned example involving triangles.) The analyticity of the former proposition renders this cancellation plainly contradictory. On the other hand, writes Kant, "if I cancel the subject *together with* the predicate, then no contradiction arises; for there is no longer anything that could be contradicted."⁷⁰ This move eliminates the real entity (the subject) to which its property (the predicate) can correspond—thus it cannot yield a

⁶⁶ Kant, A594/B622.

⁶⁷ Smith, *A Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 528. Emphasis added.

⁶⁸ See Smith, *A Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 528. See also Chignell, 168.

⁶⁹ N.B.: In my citing of the Guyer and Wood translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I have unbolded any bolded selections that I wish to include as direct quotations.

⁷⁰ Kant, A595/B623. Emphasis added.

contradiction. As I will show, the claimed lack of contradiction is pivotal to Kant's argument that "existence" is not a property that can be permissibly included in the concept of any object.⁷¹

Kant then goes on to analyze Descartes's purportedly analytic statement "God exists." According to Kant, neither of the following claims is logically self-contradictory: "God exists"; "God does not exist." For any contradiction can arise only at the level of reality—i.e., these statements are not contradictory *in themselves*, but are simply inconsistent with a given state of affairs. (Consider that God cannot both exist and not exist in reality, but either proposition can be true in a way in which the internally contradictory proposition "every triangle has six angles" cannot.)

As Chignell observes, Kant has identified an important disanalogy between (a) geometrical claims about, e.g., certain properties belonging to certain triangles, and (b) non-mathematical claims about, e.g., certain properties belonging to God, namely that the concepts in (a) are the result of intuitive, a priori formulations, but the concepts in (b) come from ordinary language.⁷² In Harrelson's apt words, Kant holds that "geometrical propositions assert only hypothetical necessity; the analogy with the triangle and the sum of its sides refers only to a conditionally necessary *judgment*."⁷³ A conditionally necessary judgment, however, is of course different from an absolutely necessary state of affairs that includes the existence of a triangle. Any necessity attaching to a triangle or God is not existential but rather concerns a claim about the objects; for example, the proposition that triangles are three-sided is necessarily true given the definition of a triangle.

⁷¹ Kant also discusses his view that existence cannot be a predicate in *Nachlass*. For further discussion see: Harrelson, 172.

⁷² In his critical period, Kant holds that definitions are proper to mathematical argumentation, whereas mere explanations are proper in philosophy. See Chignell, 161-63.

⁷³ Harrelson, 175. Emphasis added.

Kant emphasizes that if one cancels the existence of God, one cancels <God> (the subject) and *all* other possible predicates of <God>; however, the same does not hold true if one negates one predicate at a time. As to the concept of a necessary being, Kant writes: “If you cancel its existence, then you cancel the thing itself with all its predicates; where then is the contradiction supposed to come from?”⁷⁴ An instructive example is the proposition “God is omnipotent.” Negating the predicate of this analytic judgment, Kant observes, yields the self-contradictory proposition: “God is not omnipotent.” (We can say the same of other relevant predicates: omniscience, omnibenevolence, etc.) But the story is different for the proposition “God exists.” Negatively positing the concept of God (including God’s predicates) yields a proposition that is not *self-contradictory*, namely “God does not exist.” The upshot is that existential propositions must be synthetic rather than analytic.⁷⁵ As a result, ontological proofs – i.e., those starting from the concept of God alone – do not rightly command belief, and “existence” is a logical rather than a real predicate. “If we say ‘There is no God,’” writes Kemp Smith, then “neither the omnipotence nor any other attribute remains; and there is therefore not the least contradiction in saying that God does not exist.”⁷⁶ (We shall return to this point later in this section.)

Subsequently in the text, Kant notes that there is but a single further means by which one might overcome the objection that canceling a subject and predicate can never yield a contradiction: namely, to posit an absolutely necessary subject. Yet, as Kant points out, this is “just the presupposition whose correct-

⁷⁴ Kant, A595/B623.

⁷⁵ Kant conceived of the sphere of propositions as consisting of analytic propositions and synthetic propositions. In analytic propositions (judgments of clarification), the predicate “B” belongs to the subject “A” and is covertly contained within it. In synthetic propositions (judgments of amplification), B lies entirely outside the concept of A. (See: Kant, A7-10/B11-14.)

⁷⁶ Smith, *A Commentary to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 529.

ness I doubted.”⁷⁷ Kant later argues against a related objection to his critique of the ontological proof, which holds that only the concept of the most real being sufficiently accounts for the idea of necessary existence.⁷⁸ Chignell nicely summarizes Kant’s conception of the *ens realissimum*, as “the being that essentially exemplifies a maximal version of every fundamental positive predicate or ‘reality’ (*realitas*) which can be possessed by anything else.”⁷⁹ This objection grants that the *ens realissimum* has all reality and is possible, and holds that existence “lies in the concept of something possible.”⁸⁰ At issue then is whether “existence is capable of being included in the concept of a *possible* being.”⁸¹ After granting the possibility of a most real being, Kant quickly dispenses with this objection on the ground that one who advances it already presupposes the existence of something that is merely possible.⁸² As noted previously, conceptual analysis is not sufficient in itself to prove existential claims; thus, a concept of a *possible* being with all reality does not suffice to entail the being’s *actual* existence. (Unlike Descartes, Kant did not make a unique exception here for God. One reason for this divergence is Kant’s view that the existence of anything cannot be proven *a priori*—a view which Descartes clearly rejected.) Additionally, Kant makes clear later in this section of *CPR* that claims about “reality” do not serve as ample substitutes for claims about existence. Rather, such claims simply presuppose existence in both the subject and predicate, under a word slightly different from “existence.”⁸³

⁷⁷ Kant, A595/B623.

⁷⁸ Kant, A607/B635.

⁷⁹ Chignell, 158.

⁸⁰ Kant, A597/B625.

⁸¹ Smith, *A Commentary to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 530. Emphasis original. See also Harrelson, 30, concerning the legitimacy of rejecting the application of a general rule about existence to the special case of God.

⁸² Cf. Wood, *Kant’s Rational Theology*, 103.

⁸³ Smith notes that Kant treats the terms “reality” and “existence” synonymously. See: *A Commentary to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 530.

Let's now home in on Kant's claim that existential propositions must be either analytic or synthetic. If one takes existential propositions to be analytic, then the thing whose existence is asserted either must be in the thinker, or one must have presupposed the thing's existence as merely possible.⁸⁴ It is false, however, that the thing whose existence is asserted is actually in the thinker, and it is tautologous to infer that a thing exists on the basis of the thing's internal possibility alone—after all, we have assumed *in the first place* that the thing's existence is merely possible. Each alternative fails. And since (1) the two alternatives taken together are exhaustive, and (2) it is not necessarily contradictory to reject an existential predicate of a synthetic proposition, one must “concede ... that every existential proposition is synthetic.”⁸⁵ This claim runs directly afoul of Descartes's ontological proof. For the cancellation of a predicate yields an obvious contradiction *only* in analytic propositions (e.g., it *is* a contradiction to say “God is not omnipotent”). One must admit then, says Kant, that existential predicates – which, as shown, are only in synthetic propositions – *can* be cancelled (e.g., it is *not* a contradiction to say “God does not exist”).⁸⁶ Accordingly, <existence> cannot be a real predicate, and Descartes erroneously contended that from <God> necessarily comes <existence>.

Kant then goes on to discuss a further objection that can be leveled against this line of reasoning, namely that the copula “is” functions as a predicate. Consider the proposition “God is omnipotent.” Although it could be argued here that “is” somehow implies the existence of God, for Kant this view is misinformed. Kant views the word “is” (a subject of long-standing dispute going back at least to Aristotle) as “only that

⁸⁴ Kant, A597/B625.

⁸⁵ Kant, A598/B626.

⁸⁶ Kant, A596-8/B624-6.

which posits the predicate in relation to the subject.”⁸⁷ Although logicians such as Frege have since taken issue with this claim,⁸⁸ the key point for our purposes is this: for Kant, “is” does not add anything to a subject; it merely provides the predicate and implies its conceptual link to the subject. Kant concludes that since existence is not a real predicate and neither is the word “is,” then “[b]eing is obviously not a real predicate” either.⁸⁹ As Jonathan Bennett notes, though Kant says that existence “and its cognates can *behave* like predicates in a sentence,” this does not imply that existence is a real rather than (merely) *logical* predicate.⁹⁰ A term’s linguistic function does not entail that it refers to an actual property.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Kant, A599/B627. See also, e.g., Smith, *A Commentary to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 530.

⁸⁸ Besides its illuminating contributions to the philosophy of religion, this section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* also made a crucial historical contribution to the field of logic. Kant’s argument according to which existence is not a real predicate prefigured important work both by nineteenth-century logician Gottlob Frege, and by twentieth-century philosopher Bertrand Russell, who refined Frege’s work. Interestingly, Kant had already developed this argument at length in his pre-critical *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*. See *OPA*, 116-122, where Kant notes, e.g., “[t]he concept of the subject only contains predicates of possibility” – i.e., it does not contain predicates of necessary existence (118). Despite lacking the tools of contemporary logic (most notably, existential quantification), Kant was able to propound in *OPA* and *CPR* a novel argument according to which it is impermissible to include the property “existence” in the concept of any object.

It would be impossible herein to do justice to the various ways in which Kant has influenced contemporary logical discourse about, e.g., the distinction between first- and second-level predicates. For further analysis, see: Forgie (“How is the question ‘Is Existence a Predicate?’ relevant to the ontological argument?”, 124-25); McGinn (*Logical Properties: Identity, Existence, Predication, Necessity, Truth*, 48-51); Miller (“Existence”; Sections 2-8); and Wilkerson, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 142-47.

⁸⁹ Kant, A599/B627.

⁹⁰ Jonathan Bennett, *Kant’s Dialectic*, 228.

⁹¹ Note that this line of argument is, of course, controversial. As Harrelson suggests in *The Ontological Argument from Descartes to Hegel*, “to assert that ‘being is not a predicate,’ and to make pretense that this should be relevant to the ontological argument, is thus to assume that laws governing statements about finite entities should apply also to theological claims” (Harrelson, 31). Such an assumption is far from uncontroversial.

At this point some may get the feeling that Kant's section on the ontological proof is a veritable *tour de force*. For Kant has effectively demoted the status of existence from a real property to a mere logical predicate deployable in judgments such as "God exists": Kant has shown, he thinks, that "existence" cannot, as a predicate, be permissibly added to the concept of any object. Kant holds that the said demotion entails the failure of the ontological proof, a proof that is said to rest on a faulty view of existence exposed by Kant via his famous example involving 100 thalers.

Let us unpack Kant's claim that "A hundred actual [thalers] do not contain the least bit more than a hundred possible ones."⁹² Kant is comparing actually existent objects with their conceptual counterparts. For the "hundred possible [thalers]... signifies the concept," he says, and "the hundred possible ones" signifies the "object" of that concept and "its positing in itself."⁹³ Tacking on "that exists" to the end of the proposition "I have 100 thalers" does not, then, add any conceptual content to the latter phrase. Another example may be useful. Suppose I say: "I bought a comfortable red sweater that exists!" Surely the phrase "that exists" adds no conceptual content to the rest of the sentence. In other words, "existence" as a predicate cannot be legitimately included in the concept of the red sweater (or the \$100, etc.)—a counterintuitive result,⁹⁴ like so many of Kant's striking insights.⁹⁵ Kant makes this point straightforwardly at

⁹² Kant, A599/B627. I have replaced "dollars" in this translation with Kant's original term "thalers."

⁹³ Kant, A599/B627. Here Kant is drawing upon Gassendi's theory of existence. For historical elaboration – including on how Kant actually borrows his famous thalers example from Johann Bering – see Harrelson, 179-81. Note that what separates Kant's criticism according to which no thing's essence includes its existence is different from Gassendi's chiefly due to Kant's locating it in his own rich account of human cognition.

⁹⁴ It appears that most or perhaps all philosophers before Kant accepted the commonsensical assumption that existence is a property of existing things.

⁹⁵ To this great counterintuitive insight, one can of course add many of Kant's ideas. Consider the argument in the Transcendental Aesthetic according to which

A601/B629: “whatever and however much our concept of an object may contain, we have to go out beyond it in order to provide it with existence.”⁹⁶ This example supports Kant’s anti-Cartesian claim that existential propositions are synthetic, not analytic.

Kant’s point about existence not adding to or enlarging a concept has received ample attention in the literature. Allen Wood notes Kant’s view that existence does not add any *new* information to <God> and thus is not a real predicate.⁹⁷ In this vein, consider an example offered by Jonathan Bennett. If a person P asks another person Q to get P a cold drink, the adjective “cold” adds information as a descriptor of the desired drink. But if P instead asks Q to get P an existent drink, existence does not add information in the way that “cold” does.⁹⁸ Yet Kant’s view is far from uncontroversial, however. In a critical treatment, T. E. Wilkerson first notes that Kant’s discussion of a predicate “enlarging” or “adding to” a concept is not only metaphorical but potentially misleading as well.⁹⁹ On reflection, we might say, the notion that some entity E can add to or enlarge a concept leaves it at least *unclear* just what it means for such “addition” or “enlargement” to occur. Secondly, says Wilkerson, even if such discussion is clear enough, Kant’s claim about existence not adding new information to a concept admits of troubling counterexamples. For example, “existing chairs differ from non-existing chairs ... because they can be sat on” and “it is much easier to score against a non-existent

space and time are pure *a priori* forms of sensible intuition: Committed Newtonians and Leibnizians must have been startled by this brilliantly argued-for but highly counterintuitive conclusion.

⁹⁶ Kant, A601/B629.

⁹⁷ Wood, *Kant’s Rational Theology*, 104; see also: 106.

⁹⁸ Bennett, *Kant’s Dialectic*, 232-33. Bennett also discusses Norman Malcolm’s famous argument for *necessary* existence in this context, noting that bring someone a “necessary existent” drink *does* add information in a way that makes bringing any drink at all not necessarily a reliable way to meet the drink request.

⁹⁹ Wilkerson, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 142.

football team than against an existing football team,” etc.¹⁰⁰ Critics such as Wilkerson reject the claim that existence adds no new information as a predicate to any given concept.

Before proceeding further, let us add two points. To begin with, there are three important reasons why Kant’s criticism of the ontological argument does not succeed *prima facie*. First, it may seem odd to say that <God> constitutes a special case in which we can get real existence from merely possessing a concept; however, as Mendelssohn argued in 1785, this claim is not decisively problematic in itself. Second, the success or failure of the ontological proof depends crucially on the relationship between the finite and the infinite, which Kant’s argument against the validity of predicating existence of <God> does not address.¹⁰¹ A third criticism of Kant’s treatment of the ontological argument comes from F. E. England, who held that “Kant’s formulation of the onto-logical argument, and still more his treatment of it, reveals an extraordinary imperfect grasp of the significance of the argument as such.”¹⁰² England’s point is that, despite its imperfections, Anselm’s ontological argument focuses on (to use England’s phrase) “the real question” of whether we need to posit an *ens realissimum* “as the necessary presupposition of things.”¹⁰³ Interestingly, Kant himself answers this question in the affirmative, though for different reasons than many of his critics espouse.

The second point of emphasis is this: we must distinguish clearly between existence as a logical predicate and existence as a real property. Any concept can serve as a logical predicate; one can assert, for example, that “Kant is Kant,” such that the proposition’s predicate is identical to the proposition’s subject. One can also legitimately add, for instance, the predicate “blue-

¹⁰⁰ Wilkerson, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 142.

¹⁰¹ These points come from Harrelson’s illuminating historical treatment of Kant on the ontological argument. See Harrelson, Ch. 6, esp. 190-91.

¹⁰² England, 123.

¹⁰³ England, 124.

ness” to the concept of every blue thing. But existence cannot be so added to the concept of any existent thing. In other words, blueness and existence are saliently different, since the former is a real predicate and the latter is not.

After arguing that existence cannot add to a given concept, Kant makes an important distinction between objects that are perceived sensibly and objects that are thought via pure categories (i.e., categories which lack empirical content).¹⁰⁴ Objects of sense should not be confused with concepts of those objects. Rather, such a concept “is not in the least increased” when considered as part of experience, but is simply thought “as in agreement with the universal conditions of a possible empirical cognition in general.”¹⁰⁵ Kant subsequently asserts (at A601/B629) that it is illegitimate to presuppose the existence of objects outside the unity of experience. Indeed, “our consciousness of all existence ... belongs entirely and without exception to the unity of experience.”¹⁰⁶ Thus “an existence outside this field,” while possible strictly speaking, cannot be justifiably presupposed.¹⁰⁷ This point appears to conflict directly with Descartes’s ontological argument, since for Kant objects of pure thinking are knowable only *a priori*. On my interpretation these objects include God (in fact, Kant talks about a “highest being” in the subsequent paragraph). So, Kant is implying the anti-Cartesian conclusion that God’s existence¹⁰⁸ cannot be known *a priori* since God is outside the unity

¹⁰⁴ See: Kant, Introduction, A2/B3: “Among *a priori* cognitions, however, those are called pure with which nothing empirical is intermixed.” (There is no “A” marking in my version of the Guyer-Wood translation; B3 presumably corresponds to A2.)

¹⁰⁵ Kant, A601/B629. These conditions are laid out in largely in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* (pp. 172-192), where Kant discusses space and time as *a priori* forms of sensible intuition.

¹⁰⁶ Kant, A602/B630.

¹⁰⁷ Kant, A602/B630.

¹⁰⁸ Not to be confused with <God>.

of experience. Whether or not God exists, it is unjustifiable on the said ground to presuppose God's existence.

Kant concludes his section on the ontological proof by locating his analysis historically. Moving beyond his analysis of Descartes's ontological proof, Kant briefly notes that the great rationalist Leibniz was wrong to have thought that he arrived at reliable *a priori* insights into the necessary existence of God.¹⁰⁹ Such insights fail for the reasons given above. Unfortunately, however, Kant's discussion of his argument vis-à-vis Leibniz's proof is rather sketchy.¹¹⁰

Overall, Kant has produced an incisive critique of Descartes's revival of the ontological argument, which erroneously held that the proposition "God exists" is (in Kantian parlance) analytic. Kant has striven to dispel the "illusion" that besets the ontological argument, namely the argument's "confusion of a logical predicate with a real one."¹¹¹ Moreover, Kant has asserted that existence cannot be a property of the concept of any being, undermining the force of the notion that "God exists" is a claim any more necessary than the claim "God does not exist." And, at A593/B621, Kant has carefully distinguished between (1) nominally *defining* a necessary being as "something whose non-being is impossible" and (2) the ability to *know* "whether or not through this concept we are thinking anything at all."¹¹² This distinction comports with Kant's claim that omnipotence may be contained in <God>, but existence need not be.

Having understood Kant's complex argument, let us consider this important question: Can a broader conclusion be

¹⁰⁹ See: Kant, A602/B630.

¹¹⁰ Footnote 99 in the Guyer and Wood edition of the first Critique provides useful insight here. For further discussion in the secondary literature, see also: *Kant on God; Logic and Theism: Arguments For and Against Beliefs in God*; and *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*.

¹¹¹ Kant, A599/B627.

¹¹² Kant, A593/B621. Cf. Norman K. Smith, *A Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 527-28.

drawn about Kant's criticism of the ontological proof in the *Critique of Pure Reason*? Certainly the following conclusion can be drawn in connection with Kant's concerns about the pretensions of certain metaphysicians. In his discussion of the ontological proof, Kant is calling for epistemological modesty and acceptance of the claim, says Peter Byrne, that "our understanding of God's nature can never be such as to enable us to prove God's existence from that understanding."¹¹³ It is instructive to juxtapose a particular question posed by Descartes in the *Fifth Meditation* with the conclusion suggested by Byrne. In the *Fifth Meditation*, Descartes asks: "For what is more *obvious* in itself than that the supreme being exists, that is to say, that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists?"¹¹⁴ This statement is a clear example of the type of epistemological confidence that Kant finds excessive. For one can plausibly say that Kant's criticism of the ontological proof upholds, both in its results (e.g., the insights it yields) and performatively (i.e., *how* it yields such insights), his concern about the unjustifiable epistemic pretensions of many metaphysicians. After all, Kant's incisive critique of the ontological proof constitutes a historically well-received argument against this "obvious" rationalistic assertion by Descartes.

In ending his discussion of the ontological proof with a rhetorical flourish, Kant underscores the futility of such metaphysical overconfidence:

Thus the famous ontological (Cartesian) proof of the existence of a highest being from concepts is only so much trouble and labor lost, and a human being can no more become richer in insight from mere ideas than a merchant

¹¹³ Byrne, 29. Byrne is discussing Kant's general views on theoretical proofs of God's existence, but his discussion is applicable to Kant's analysis of the ontological proof.

¹¹⁴ Descartes, 49. Emphasis added.

could in resources if he wanted to improve his financial state by adding a few zeros to his cash balance.¹¹⁵

Kant thinks he has toppled the ontological proof once and for all.

IV. Plantinga's Objection from Irrelevance

Recent Debate about Plantinga's View

Kant's criticisms of the ontological argument have been richly debated since the publication of *CPR*, including by contemporary philosophers of religion. Although many twentieth- and twenty-first century theorists (e.g., Kurt Gödel, Norman Malcolm, Charles Harsthorne, David Lewis) have made major contributions to the sizeable literature on Kant's objections, Alvin Plantinga's argument according to which Kant's criticism is irrelevant to the ontological proof seems to me to be particularly worthy of further consideration.¹¹⁶ An important reason for this is that Plantinga's critique has received a good deal of recent attention, including in Jordan

¹¹⁵ Kant, A603/B631. To reinforce our analysis in this section, it is useful to note Buroker's explication of Kant's three criticisms of the ontological proof. First, necessity applies only to analytic statements, and objects that are claimed to correspond to purely analytic propositions may or may not really exist. Second, the concept of a highest, most real being – the *ens realissimum* – lacks objective meaning such that discussion of it is likewise meaningless. Finally, existence cannot justifiably be treated as a real property of things—it is just a logical predicate (Buroker, 269).

¹¹⁶ Numerous texts on contemporary analytic philosophy address Plantinga's qualified support of the ontological argument. For example, a recent review of key contributions by contemporary philosophers includes coverage of Plantinga's position on the ontological argument. See: Boundas, 316. In addition, a number of sources in the bibliography of this paper cite Plantinga. (This is not, of course, to suggest that the other theorists' treatments of Kant's criticisms do not merit significant attention.)

Sobel's illuminating 652-page book *Logic and Theism: Arguments For and Against Beliefs in God*, published in 2004.¹¹⁷

Sobel's Dismissal of Plantinga's Objection-from-Irrelevance

Let us consider Sobel's views on what I call Plantinga's objection-from-irrelevance before presenting the objection in depth. Sobel's assessment of Plantinga's objection is accurate, in my view, but incomplete. In *Logic and Theism*, Sobel observes that "Plantinga assesses Kant's critique as if it were addressed to Anselm's ontological argument."¹¹⁸ This charge of historical confusion is accurate: Plantinga several times alludes to Kant's failures to undermine *Anselm's* ontological argument. And yet, in his text *God, Freedom, and Evil* (the key text on which Sobel's analysis relies¹¹⁹), Plantinga not once mentions Descartes, whose ontological argument in the *Fifth Meditation* is indeed the primary target of Kant's objections.¹²⁰

Although this is a significant lacuna in Plantinga's assessment, Sobel's intimation that Plantinga's argument-from-irrelevance is moot on account of this error is questionable.¹²¹ For example, in his section "Immanuel Kant's Critique of Descartes's Ontological Argument," Sobel does not explicitly consider whether at least *some* lessons from *God, Freedom, and Evil* can be profitably applied to Descartes's formulation. Sobel

¹¹⁷ See, Sobel, 68. See also: Boundas, 316.

¹¹⁸ Sobel, 68.

¹¹⁹ Sobel cites this text on p. 68 (section 5.3) of *Logic and Theism: Arguments For and Against Beliefs in God*. Although the index of his book includes some of Plantinga's other texts treating this topic (see p. 640), Sobel's analysis relies by and large on Plantinga's analysis in *God, Freedom, and Evil*. I shall focus on *God, Freedom, and Evil* in my subsequent argument against Sobel.

¹²⁰ Sobel notes that "there is no mention of Descartes's argument" in *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Sobel, 68).

¹²¹ The absence of a mention of Descartes's work, against which Kant was largely reacting, is conspicuous even on a highly charitable reading of *God, Freedom, and Evil*.

seems to dismiss hastily the substance of Plantinga's argument rather than considering its possible application to a relevantly similar version of the ontological argument—Descartes's. Taking up where Sobel left off is the task to which I now turn.

There are two weighty reasons to think that Plantinga's analysis is substantially applicable to Kant's objections irrespective of any historical inaccuracies in Plantinga's account. First, Kant apparently intends to offer a freestanding argument in "On the impossibility of an ontological proof of God's existence."¹²² If Kant thought that his argument applied exclusively to Descartes's proof, it is unclear why he mentions Descartes only once by name.¹²³ Kant could of course have purposely avoided a more direct or confrontational approach to targeting Descartes's ontological argument due, say, to the literary conventions of the day; nonetheless the fact remains that he mentions Descartes only once—and parenthetically at that.¹²⁴ A plausible interpretation of this fact is that Kant means to offer a *freestanding* argument against ontological arguments in general rather than merely respond to one philosopher's version of the ontological argument.

A second reason to think, contra Sobel, that Plantinga's analysis is substantially applicable to Kant's objections is similar to the first reason. The second reason, too, concerns the fact that Kant's objections are geared toward ontological arguments as collectively constituting one kind of proof of God's existence. That these arguments constitute a kind of proof means, I suggest, that they share a basically similar character. Support for this claim comes from Graham Oppy's definition of ontological

¹²² Kant, A592/B620.

¹²³ Not that Plantinga's historical oversight is therefore understandable: Kant intimates in several places a direct connection to Descartes's *Fifth Meditation*. For example, Kant's example (See: pp. 564-565) that "every triangle has three angles" seems to recall the example that Descartes used in his analogy between the necessary truths of analytic geometry and that of God's existence.

¹²⁴ That is, parenthetically in my Guyer-Wood edition of the first Critique.

arguments, which suggests that all ontological arguments have a common core:

Ontological arguments are arguments, for the conclusion that God exists, from premises which are supposed to derive from some source other than observation of the world—e.g., from reason alone. In other words, ontological arguments are arguments from nothing but analytic, *a priori* and necessary premises to the conclusion that God exists.¹²⁵

Now ontological arguments – whether Anselm’s, Descartes’s, Leibniz’s, or others’ – concern God qua *necessary being*, a kind of being that Matthew Davidson defines as one “that could not have failed to exist.”¹²⁶ So a key feature of all ontological arguments is that “all of them entail that God exists necessarily.”¹²⁷ Scholars such as Rossi have also pointed to this common core: “Fundamental to the ontological argument is the view that ‘existence’ is necessarily a property of the concept of God.”¹²⁸ Two points follow from the fact that ontological arguments (like any *kind* of argument) have a common core. First, since Kant’s objections address the core of ontological arguments, and Kant critiques the existential view noted above and Plantinga addresses his criticism, mustn’t Plantinga’s argument be germane to most or all versions of the ontological proof? Second, since (as I later show) Plantinga confronts some of the objections directly, his critique thereof must be germane to the arguments’ common core and thus also to non-Anselmian ontological arguments. Plantinga’s arguments would then ne-

¹²⁵ Oppy, 1. Oppy also identifies various types of ontological arguments: definitional, conceptual (hypertensional), modal, Meinongian, experiential, mereological, and “Hegelian” ontological arguments (Oppy, 4). The quotations around Hegelian refer to Oppy’s disbelief that Hegel actually provided a successful ontological argument to which Hegelians can explicitly point.

¹²⁶ Davidson, 1.

¹²⁷ Davidson, 2.

¹²⁸ Rossi, “Kant’s Philosophy of Religion,” Section 2.1.

cessarily be relevant to other formulations of the ontological proof including to some significant degree those propounded by Descartes and Leibniz.¹²⁹ On the collective weight of this reason and the reasons preceding it, we are justified in moving beyond Sobel's analysis to examine Plantinga's objection-from-irrelevance, while at the same time neither overemphasizing nor discounting entirely the historical inaccuracy, noted by Sobel, that marks Plantinga's broader treatment of Kant.

¹²⁹ Recent work by Jill Vance Buroker provides additional support for this claim. In her careful characterization of Anselm and Descartes's respective ontological arguments in her 2006 textbook on the first Critique, Buroker *combines* these arguments into a single schematization (see: *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason: An Introduction*, 267-274). Buroker's schematization, given on pp. 268-269, runs as follows (below I translate "*ens realissimum*" as Guyer and Wood have in their 2007 edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 570):

1. It is possible to conceive of an *ens realissimum* [most real being] (that than which nothing greater can be conceived or the supremely perfect being) [Here Buroker is referring to Anselm's formulation first and Descartes's second.]
2. Assume that this being can be conceived not to exist (that the idea of existence can be separated from its essence).
3. A being that cannot be conceived not to exist is greater than one that can be conceived not to exist. (Existence is a perfection.)
4. By 3, if the *ens realissimum* can be conceived not to exist, then one can conceive of something greater than it. (If existence can be separated from its essence, then it is possible to conceive a being more perfect than it.)
5. The concept of something greater than the *ens realissimum* is self-contradictory.
6. Therefore, the assumption in 2 is false: the *ens realissimum* cannot be conceived not to exist. (Existence cannot be separated from essence.)
7. Therefore, the *ens realissimum* exists necessarily (Buroker, 268-269).

The coherence and essential plausibility of this schematization strongly suggest that Anselm and Descartes's ontological arguments are basically similar. Now these arguments are of course different in certain respects; my claim is just that some difference between two arguments A and B does not mean that a treatment of objections *basic* to A cannot also apply to B if and where A and B basically overlap. Accordingly, Plantinga's treatment of Kant's objections ("A") to Anselm's argument ("B") can indeed be legitimately applied to Kant's *actual* objections to Descartes's ontological argument.

Gregory Robson, The Ontological Proof: Kant's Objections,
Plantinga's Reply, KSO 2012: 122-171.

Posted August 26, 2012 www.kantstudiesonline.net
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Plantinga on the “Irrelevance” of Kant’s Existential Objection

The final section of this paper has two main parts. First, it presents Plantinga’s well-known charge of irrelevance against Kant’s famous existential objection. Second, it attempts to fill in a gap in the extant scholarship by critically examining a few ways in which Sobel and other philosophers of religion can respond to Plantinga’s objection-from-irrelevance.¹³⁰

After motivating his discussion of Anselm’s ontological argument in *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Plantinga mentions the argument’s historical significance, the substantial recent interest it has received, etc.), Plantinga asserts: “I do not believe that any philosopher has ever given a cogent and conclusive refutation of the ontological argument in its various forms.”¹³¹ Plantinga then goes on to characterize Anselm’s ontological argument as a *reductio ad absurdum*, which in my view is an accurate characterization. As Plantinga explains it, Anselm’s central claim is that any being-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived that exists in the understanding must also exist in reality, and such a being *does* exist in the understanding, so it would be absurd to say that such a being – God – does not also exist in reality.¹³²

After presenting and then rejecting Gaunilo’s attempted refutation of Anselm’s ontological argument,¹³³ Plantinga begins his discussion of Kant’s criticism. Let us home in at once on the target of Plantinga’s critique—the part of Kant’s account that Plantinga calls “[t]he heart of Kant’s objection to the onto-

¹³⁰ Compared with Section IV of the first draft of this paper, this section covers Plantinga’s objection-from-irrelevance in greater depth and includes additional critique of this objection.

¹³¹ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 86.

¹³² Plantinga writes: “Anselm’s argument can be seen as an attempt to deduce an absurdity from the proposition that there is no God” (*God, Freedom, and Evil*, 87).

¹³³ Fn. 42 of this paper discusses Plantinga’s critique of Gaunilo’s objection.

logical argument.”¹³⁴ Plantinga presents the passage from *CPR* according to which being is not a real predicate and a hundred real thalers contains no more than a hundred possible thalers. In the light of this example, he writes: “Perhaps Kant means to make a point that we could put by saying that it’s not possible to *define things into existence*.”¹³⁵ After noting that “this claim is somehow connected with Kant’s famous but perplexing *dictum* that *being* (or existence) is not a real predicate or property,” Plantinga wonders: “What does it mean to say that existence isn’t (or is) a real property?”¹³⁶

It is useful here to quote Plantinga’s text at length, especially where he considers the steps involved in defining a concept:

In defining a concept—*bachelor*, let’s say, or *prime number*—one lists a number of properties that are *severally necessary* and *jointly sufficient* for the concept’s applying to something. That is, the concept applies to a given thing only if that thing has each of the listed properties, and if a thing does have them all, then the concept in question applies to it. So, for example, to define the concept *bachelor* we list such properties as *being unmarried*, *being male*, *being over the*

¹³⁴ Plantinga begins this section with what he later notes is not a central part of Kant’s objections to the ontological proof. He criticizes Kant by arguing that only logical propositions can contradict logical propositions:

[w]hat would contradict a proposition like *God does not exist* is some other proposition—*God does exist*, for example. Kant seems to think that if the proposition in question *were* necessarily false, it would have to contradict, not a proposition, but some *object* external to God—or else contradict some internal part or aspect or property of God. But this certainly looks like confusion; it is *propositions* that contradict each other; they aren’t contradicted by objects or parts, aspects or properties of objects. (Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 93.)

Now it seems true, strictly speaking, that an object cannot contradict a proposition; however, this kind of claim seems trivial so long as *another proposition* can adequately describe the said object. I am not sure why Plantinga pushes this point so strongly.

¹³⁵ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 95.

¹³⁶ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 95.

age of twenty-five, and the like. Take any one of these properties: a thing is a bachelor only if it has it, and if a thing has all of them, then it follows that it is a bachelor.¹³⁷

The central point of Plantinga's passage is that, in defining a concept, one identifies a group of "severally necessary and jointly sufficient" properties required to successfully apply the concept.

Plantinga's next main step is critically to examine Kant's claim that existence is not a real property. He wonders about the import of adding <existence> to <bachelor> to yield, as he terms it, <superbachelor>.¹³⁸ One result of so doing is that every bachelor would then need to be a superbachelor (since, says Plantinga, a superbachelor just is an existing bachelor), and every superbachelor would need to be a bachelor (by definition).¹³⁹ Now it might be tempting here to say that since it is a *necessary* truth that bachelors are unmarried, it is also a necessary truth that superbachelors exist. Yet it is *not* a necessary truth that superbachelors exist. Rather, that superbachelors (or bachelors) exist will be a *contingent* truth (a truth that need not be true necessarily), says Plantinga.

The only necessary truth that is relevant here, Plantinga tells us, is that "everything that is a superbachelor exists."¹⁴⁰ This is true because just as the necessary proposition "bachelors are unmarried" entails that the proposition "everything that is a bachelor is unmarried" is a necessary proposition, the proposition "superbachelors exist" entails that the proposition "everything that is a superbachelor exists" is a necessary proposition. "All that follows" from a logical translation of the former pro-

¹³⁷ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 95. Incidentally, being over the age of twenty-five is certainly a contestable criterion for bachelorhood.

¹³⁸ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 95.

¹³⁹ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 97.

¹⁴⁰ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 96.

position is “that ‘All the superbachelors there are *exist.*’”¹⁴¹ Now this proposition is of course “not really very startling,” says Plantinga, since it does not entail that any superbachelors actually do exist.¹⁴² Plantinga next makes an important suggestion in the light of this analysis, namely, that Kant’s key aim in arguing against the ontological proof may have been to show that it is *not a necessary truth that*, e.g., superbachelors exist.

Plantinga summarizes Kant’s criticism as follows:

Suppose we say that a property or predicate *P* is *real* only if there is some list of properties P_1 to P_N such that the result of adding *P* to the list does not define a concept equivalent (in the above sense) to that defined by the list. It then follows, of course, that existence is not a real property or predicate.¹⁴³

Plantinga concludes thus: “Kant’s point . . . is that one cannot *define things into existence* because *existence* is not a real property or predicate in the explained sense.”¹⁴⁴ Notably, Plantinga takes Kant to be arguing that existence is not a real property as regards concepts (like superbachelor) that are contingently true if true at all. Thus, Plantinga unsurprisingly takes the logical class “propositions” to include two distinct groups – necessary propositions and contingent propositions¹⁴⁵ – and suggests that Kant’s criticism of the ontological proof applies only to contingent propositions. Now Plantinga’s view is that all of the premises in Anselm’s argument “are *necessarily* true if true at all.”¹⁴⁶ This claim points us to Plantinga’s main critique: that Kant’s criticism does not apply to necessarily true propositions

¹⁴¹ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 96. Emphasis original.

¹⁴² Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 96.

¹⁴³ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 97. Emphasis original.

¹⁴⁴ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 97. Emphasis original. As noted above, Plantinga also suggests this point (though less explicitly) on p. 95.

¹⁴⁵ Necessary propositions are true necessarily if true at all; contingent propositions are true contingently if true at all.

¹⁴⁶ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 88.

(i.e., it is “irrelevant” to such propositions), so it is not germane to Anselm’s argument. Though propositions like “There are some bachelors” (an existential claim) are contingent, the propositions that serve in Anselm’s ontological argument are, according to Plantinga, necessarily true if true at all. Plantinga writes: “If this were Anselm’s procedure—if he had simply added existence to a concept that has application contingently if at all—then indeed his argument would be subject to the Kantian criticism. But he didn’t, and it isn’t.”¹⁴⁷ Plantinga is saying that <God> is not a contingent concept, such that for this reason and those stated above, Kant’s criticism does not apply to Anselm’s ontological argument.

Having understood Plantinga’s objection-from-irrelevance, we are now equipped to go beyond Sobel’s inadequately justified dismissal of it. To gain some traction against Plantinga’s objection-from-irrelevance, Sobel (or any other philosopher) would do well to pursue one or more of the following strategies:

- A. argue that Plantinga’s interpretation of Anselm’s argument is less plausible than another interpretation thereof;
- B. argue that Kant’s criticism *does* apply to necessary (and not just contingent) propositions; or,
- C. argue that Anselm’s ontological proof relies unavoidably on at least one premise which is true contingently if true at all (such that Kant’s criticism may apply to Anselm’s proof even on Plantinga’s own terms).

In what follows, I shall pursue each strategy in turn, with a view to determining how plausible Plantinga’s objection-from-irrelevance is in relation to the cumulative weight of moves (A), (B), and (C).

¹⁴⁷ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 98.

Let us begin with (A). One way to pursue strategy (A) is to consider whether Plantinga is right that Anselm has not tried to define God into existence. Now Plantinga clearly expects an answer of “nowhere” to the question: Where did Anselm try to define God into being by adding existence to a list of properties that defined some concept? Having asserted both that Kant’s point is that one cannot define things into existence and that Anselm does not do so, Plantinga wonders why Anselm could not simply “thank Kant for this interesting point and proceed merrily on his way?”¹⁴⁸ Is Plantinga right that Kant’s critique is not relevant at all to Anselm’s proof?

It seems he is not. Anselm’s point in giving a list of properties (omnipotence, omnibenevolence, etc.) of the Greatest Being that excludes existence is, as I read him, precisely to show that this list is deficient in that respect. Since this list is not suitable to a Greatest Being, existence *must* be a property of <the Greatest Being>. Any definition of <Greatest Being> that does not include the predicate “existence” is inadequate because, as Anselm tells us, “something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality.”¹⁴⁹ Anselm accepts no definition of God that omits existence, but at the same time he argues for that very reason that God must exist—i.e., in reality and not just in the mind. This move seems much like defining God into existence.

Even if Anselm has tried to define God into existence, this strike against Plantinga’s case does not by itself undermine the objection-from-irrelevance. Plantinga could reply that *even if* Anselm’s ontological argument defines God into existence, the said argument relies exclusively on premises that are

¹⁴⁸ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 97. Plantinga asks similar questions in some of his other writings. See, for example: Plantinga, “Kant’s Objection to the Ontological Argument,” 545: “What *does* Kant’s argument show, then? How could anyone be led to suppose that Kant’s claim did dispose of the Ontological Argument?”

¹⁴⁹ Anselm, 1965 (quoted in Sobel, 59).

necessarily true if true at all. Thus, the argument might go, Anselm's ontological argument is invulnerable to Kant's existential objection since this objection applies only to contingent propositions. Yet this line of argument is questionable for reasons we shall see below.

Let us turn now to strategy (B), which challenges Plantinga's interpretation of Kant by suggesting that Kant's criticism applies to necessary propositions. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I take Kant to be arguing that the predicate "existence" cannot be legitimately included in the concept of any object. It is not clear then that Kant would accept Plantinga's apparently narrower reading of his criticism as applying to contingent propositions alone rather than to necessary propositions as well.¹⁵⁰ In Plantinga's <superbachelor> example, he suggests that Kant is warning against developing concepts that simply add existence to a *contingent* concept like "bachelor."¹⁵¹ It seems, however, that this example – even if true – shows only that Kant's criticism *does* apply to contingent premises. To convincingly support Plantinga's objection-from-irrelevance, more would need to be said as to why Kant's criticism cannot also apply to necessary propositions.

Let us turn now to the third option – strategy (C). Granting for the sake of argument that Plantinga has shown that Kant's criticism does not apply to necessary premises, it may still be the case that Anselm's ontological argument does, in fact, depend on at least one premise that is true contingently if at all. To investigate this possibility, let us delve more deeply into Plantinga's view that: "All the premises of the [Anselmian]

¹⁵⁰ This is a matter of textual and historical dispute that would perhaps take a good deal of further elaboration or even a separate paper. In any case, it seems that Kant nowhere explicitly endorses such a distinction in his section on the ontological proof.

¹⁵¹ Plantinga writes: "the proposition *there are bachelors* [note the existential claim here], while true, is obviously not necessarily true" (Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 95).

argument are, if true at all, necessarily true.”¹⁵² To set up his argument for this conclusion, Plantinga offers the following schematization, which nicely summarizes Anselm’s ontological argument as a *reductio ad absurdum* (the parentheses and brackets therein are in the original text unless otherwise noted).¹⁵³

- 1) God exists in the understanding but not in reality.
(premise)
- 2) Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone. (premise)
- 3) God’s existence in reality is conceivable. (premise)
- 4) If God did exist in reality, then He would be greater than He is. [from (1) and (2)]
- 5) It is conceivable that there is a being greater than God is. [(3)¹⁵⁴ and (4)]
- 6) It is conceivable that there be a being greater than the being than which nothing greater can be conceived. [(5) by the definition of “God”]
- 7) [Plantinga adds here: “But surely (6) is absurd and self-contradictory; how could we conceive of a being greater than the being than which none greater can be conceived? So we may conclude that proposition (7) is true.”]
- 8) It is false that God exists in the understanding but not in reality.
- 9) [Plantinga concludes: “It follows that if God exists in the understanding, He also exists in reality; but clearly enough He *does* exist in the understanding, as even

¹⁵² Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 88.

¹⁵³ Plantinga calls this a “rough” schematization – but it is the only one he offers, and much of his argument about Anselm’s proof depends critically on it.

¹⁵⁴ Actually, the text here reads “[13) and (4)]”, but I suspect that this is a typographical error.

the fool will testify; therefore, He exists in reality as well.”]¹⁵⁵

Plantinga rightly considers (1), (2), and (3) to be the only freestanding premises in Anselm’s ontological argument (how the other premises derive from these is indicated above). But the schematized objection-from-irrelevance raises three worries. First, Plantinga gives minimal support for his argument that premise (1) is necessarily true if true at all. I find it plausible on further analysis that premise (1) is true necessarily if true at all,¹⁵⁶ such that the lack of explicit support for this claim is not an unrecoverable weakness in Plantinga’s account. On the other hand, Plantinga does put forward an explicit (and in my view plausible¹⁵⁷) argument as to why (3) is necessarily true if true at all. So, (2) is the only remaining premise that Plantinga claims

¹⁵⁵ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 87-88. Note that I have added “(premise)” to proposition (1). Plantinga later calls this an “assumption” – but it seems that, for any schematized argument, *every* (relevant) statement must be a premise or conclusion.

Second, the phrase “than He is” in premise (4) does not follow necessarily from premises (1) and (2). One risk in using the language “He is” seems to be that of importing God’s existence into the argument without explicit justification.

¹⁵⁶ If the proposition P holds that “God exists in the understanding but not in reality,” and P is true, then P must be true always and everywhere. Plantinga interprets premise (1) “as saying that someone has *thought of* or thought about that being” (Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 88). This interpretation, however, would make the premise contingent, since it is not guaranteed that someone must have both existed and had that thought.

However, if we grant Anselm’s belief that even the fool has the idea of God, meaning that *everyone* has God in the understanding, this entails that so long as there is an understanding, God is part of it. Lending additional plausibility to the claim that P is a necessary premise is the fact that if one interprets God’s existence in the understanding as God’s being conceivable, this renders moot the contingent fact of there existing beings that have understandings in the first place, making premise P necessarily true if at all. This argument is not of course airtight, but I do find premise (1) plausible overall.

¹⁵⁷ See: Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 88. Plantinga points out that premise (3) is necessarily true if at all since it is actually ascribing a modality (specifically, possibility) of the proposition “God exists in reality.” This analysis is correct in my view.

is necessarily true if true at all. Let us now consider the plausibility of that claim.¹⁵⁸

Plantinga emphasizes that premise (2) is “presumably necessarily true in Anselm’s view.”¹⁵⁹ The first thing to note here is that the assertion that Anselm would view the premise in a certain way does minimal work if any to support the claim that premise (2) is true necessarily if at all. Although Anselm’s views matter in terms of historical debates, a plausible answer to the question whether a given proposition is true necessarily if at all does not (of course) depend on whether any particular thinker accepts or rejects the claim that it is. It also is not clear that premise (2) is a necessary proposition in the same way, for example, that the proposition “every bachelor is an unmarried male” is a necessary proposition. Although the latter proposition must apply to all bachelors, it may indeed not be the case that all things that exist in reality are “greater” than they would be were they to exist in the understanding alone. Consider the fact that “greatness” does not seem to be a monolithic concept. For instance, a greatly evil person (e.g., Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot) is presumably not *greater* if s/he exists in reality rather than just in one’s thought. Put otherwise, can the existence of a person who does terribly evil things be *greater* in reality than the person’s existence in the understanding alone? It doesn’t seem clear that we can know what a true answer to this question would even look like. On the other hand, it does seem that the existence of some beings in reality is clearly greater than their existence in the understanding alone: e.g., Mother Teresa, a dazzling fireworks display, or the Harlem Globetrotters.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 88. This particular characterization is implicit at the bottom of p. 88, para. 2, though Plantinga explicitly states (several times in fact) that the premises in his schematization of Anselm’s argument are true necessarily if true at all.

¹⁵⁹ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 88.

¹⁶⁰ This shows that certain existent (or formerly existent) beings are greater in reality than in the understanding alone. But it is also true that some beings that

Plantinga and Anselm seem to conceive of the concept of “greatness” as value-laden (i.e., as a “thick” concept), where “greater” connotes something like “better” or “containing more good” rather than just “more significant” or “more powerful” in a value-neutral sense. (E.g., they would not, of course, accept the notion that God would be greater if God were more greatly evil.) Plantinga is unfortunately not very clear about how exactly Anselm’s argument (or his schematized version of it) conceptualizes “greatness.” But it seems that any value-neutral understanding of “greatness” would be in tension with their broader theistic and metaphysical views. Yet it also seems that a value-positive conception of “greatness” would be problematic. If the word “greatness” is meant in the value-positive way, then the necessity of the proposition must be called into question. As suggested by the aforementioned examples of brutal dictators, the existence of something in reality is not obviously necessarily greater (better) than its existence only in the mind.¹⁶¹ If this claim is true, then the crucial concept “greatness” in premise (2) would appear far from monolithic, instead admitting of a plurality of senses, some of which the argument’s proponents may well have overlooked. It may indeed be the case that premise (2) can be true in some cases but not in others, and thus contingent. Given the ambiguity in the word “greatness,” it seems that more needs to be said by Plantinga if he is convincingly to show that (2) is a necessary proposition.¹⁶²

have never existed would be greater if they were to exist: Superman would be even greater, for instance, if he were real rather than fictional.

¹⁶¹ Some potentially thorny issues attach to this line of reasoning. For example, we can consider whether Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot would be greater in existence rather than just in the understanding if, on a value-positive understanding of “greatness,” they had not committed any despicably evil acts. But there remain other options if the triple-dictator example falls flat. For example, one could consider zombies or other such beings the sole purpose of whose existence is, say, to terrorize people in major cities. Such zombies would be “greater” in the discussed sense if they existed not in reality but only in the understanding.

¹⁶² Herein I am *not* making a broad argument according to which the ontological argument (or any version of it) is unsound; I am just considering Plantinga’s

Gregory Robson, *The Ontological Proof: Kant's Objections, Plantinga's Reply*, KSO 2012: 122-171.

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Further reflection, then, has raised questions about the notion that premises (1), (2), and (3) of Plantinga's schematized ontological argument are each true necessarily if at all. To be sure, my argument does not suggest that these premises may not be shown individually or collectively true on *any* account; rather, I have simply suggested that Plantinga's appears to fall short. Plantinga has argued that these premises are all "necessary" propositions in that each must be either true in all cases or true in no cases at all (just as there cannot be some bachelors that are unmarried males and some that are not). The preceding analysis, if correct, shows that despite Plantinga's account in *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Kant's criticism may indeed still be relevant to Anselm's ontological proof.¹⁶³

In this section I have argued, against Sobel, that Plantinga's argument *is* relevant to Kant's existential objection. I have also suggested that Plantinga's argument-from-irrelevance leaves ample room for one to think that Kant's criticism may still be relevant to the ontological proof. For Plantinga to show that his (quite interesting) objection-from-irrelevance holds true, he would need to fill out his argument further and plausibly assuage the worries described above.

V. Conclusion

Immanuel Kant's famous criticism of the ontological proof has rightly garnered much attention since the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In this article, I have essayed to situate Kant's arguments against the ontological proof in the

treatment thereof, especially that in *God, Freedom, and Evil*, the text on which Sobel's recent critique focuses.

¹⁶³ Two points bear note. First, per our previous discussion, Kant's criticism would then also be applicable to Descartes's proof. Second, regarding the method used herein: We relied on Plantinga's schematization of Anselm's argument and showed that premise (2) is not a "necessary" premise, despite Plantinga's argument to the contrary.

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context of its rich history of engagement by a wide range of philosophers through Kant's era. As one of the many striking parts of *CPR*, Kant's critique of the ontological proof arose in reaction to Descartes and Leibniz's versions thereof. In particular, Kant's argument according to which canceling both a subject and predicate is not contradictory (such that the proposition "God exists" is not analytic) has long occupied a prominent position in the literature. And his rejection of the view, arguably going back to Socrates himself, that the property "existence" can be legitimately included in the concept of any object is rightly held to be among the pivotal contributions in the history of philosophy.

Kant's criticisms of the ontological argument have been met with a mixed reception in contemporary analytic philosophy. An important recent opponent is Alvin Plantinga. Having continued my analysis where Sobel's left off, I argued against Sobel that Plantinga's objection-from-irrelevance is indeed germane to Kant's criticism. Plantinga's interesting objection would be more compelling, however, if it more forcefully handled the particular worries about counterexamples (A), (B), and (C) discussed above.

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