Characterisation, Existence, and Necessity

Graham Priest

July 16, 2018

Philosophy Programs, CUNY Graduate Center and the University of Melbourne

1 Introduction

Ontological arguments feature prominently in the history of Christian philosophy. An ontological argument is, roughly, one that tries to establish the existence of God from their[1] nature, or definition which captures that nature. The aim of this paper is not to present a survey of such arguments.[2] Rather, the point is to home in on what I take to be the central nerve of such arguments: the Characterization Principle—essentially, a principle to the effect that an object has those properties it is characterised as having. The Principle interacts in important ways with two other notions: existence and necessity. They will also, therefore, fall within the ambit of our discussion.

We will analyse matters by looking at ontological arguments as presented at various historical times. The earliest ontological argument for a Christian god was given by Anselm of Canterbury. I will come to him in due course. I want to start with early Modern Philosophy, where the nerve of the argument is at its most exposed. We will then turn back to Anselm. After that, we will move on to later Modern Philosophy.

[1]Traditionally, of course, the male pronoun is used. I prefer a gender neutral pronoun. *It*, however, is far too depersonalising for what is supposed to be, after all, a personal god. So I intend to use third person plural. If you want, you can think of this as the "royal they".

[2]For a general overview, see Oppy (2016).

2 The Ontological Argument in Early Modern Philosophy

2.1 Descartes

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* V, Descartes gives a very straightforward version of the ontological argument, which goes as follows:[3]

> ... whenever it happens that I think of a first and sovereign Being, and, so to speak, derive the idea of Him from the storehouse of my mind, it is necessary that I should attribute to Him every sort of perfection, although I do not get so far as to enumerate them all, or to apply my mind to each one in particular. And this necessarily suffices to make me conclude (after having recognized that existence is a perfection) that this first and sovereign Being really exists; just as though it is not necessary for me to imagine any triangle, yet, whenever I consider a rectilinear figure composed of three angles it is absolutely essential that I should attribute to it all those properties that serve to bring about the conclusion that its three angles are no greater than two right angles, even though I may not be considering this point in particular.

The thought is that existence is part of God's essence, or definition, which is to possess all the perfections. Since existence is a perfection, God exists.

God is characterised in a certain way. A characterisation is a description, so to examine the logic of the argument, we need a description operator, εx (an x such that) or ιx (the x such that). One may, in fact define the definite in terms of the indefinite, simply by invoking an appropriate uniqueness clause. Thus, $\iota x A(x)$ may be defined as $\varepsilon x(A(x) \wedge \forall y(A(y) \rightarrow y = x)$. Since uniqueness plays no real role in the arguments we will be looking at, I will use the indefinite description operator, which keeps matters simpler, whilst sacrificing nothing relevant.

Descartes characterises God as an object with all perfections. So let monadic predicates expressing the perfections be: $P_0x, P_1x, ..., P_nx$ ('x is omnipotent', 'x is omniscient', etc). Descartes takes the existence predicate, Ex, to be one of these. One might worry about the thought that existence is a perfection, but this is not very important here. Even if it is not, we can

[3] Hick, J. (1964), p. 35.

just add it to the list of the predicates. So let us take P_0x to be Ex. Let g (God) be the description: $\varepsilon x(Ex \wedge P_1x \wedge ... \wedge P_nx)$. Descartes then infers that $Eg \wedge P_1g \wedge ... \wedge P_ng$. It follows that Eg.[4]

The crucial principle of inference employed here is the Characterisation Principle (CP): $A(\varepsilon x A(x))$: if a thing is characterised as being so and so, it is so and so. Now, plausible as this principle might seem, no one can endorse it in full generality. The reason is simple. Leave existence aside for the moment. Using it, one can prove everything. Let B be any sentence. Let b be the description $\varepsilon x(x = x \wedge B)$. The CP gives us, $b = b \wedge B$; from which, B follows.[5]

So what is an appropriate restriction for the principle? An answer is provided by standard theories of descriptions: $A(\varepsilon x A(x))$ iff something satisfies $A(x)$. Thus, in Hilbert's ε-calculus, $\exists x A(x) \leftrightarrow A(\varepsilon x A(x))$, and for definite descriptions, we have $\exists x!A(x) \leftrightarrow A(\iota x A(x))$ (where ! expresses uniqueness). Indeed, in Russell's theory, this is true because of the contextual definition of ι-terms.[6] Given this restriction on the CP for ε, one can apply it as required in the argument only if $\exists x(Ex \wedge P_1x \wedge ... \wedge P_nx)$, and this is essentially what the argument sets out to prove. So its application would beg the question.

Given that the CP is not, and obviously not, in general, true, why is it so tempting? I suspect that it is so because one can express it by saying: 'a thing that is P is P'. But this is ambiguous; it can indeed express an instance of the CP; it can also express the thought that anything that is P is P (that is, $\forall x(Px \rightarrow Px)$) and this is, indeed, analytically true. Descartes suggest that he is considering the CP in this way, when, in the quotation, he likens matters to the analytically true: for all x, if x is a triangle, x has three sides.

2.2 Leibniz

Let us turn to Leibniz. Commenting on Descartes' argument, he says:[7]

---

[4]I assume that the perfections are finite in number, but nothing hangs on this. If they are not, we simply define g as $\varepsilon x \forall P(\Gamma(P) \rightarrow Px)$ Here, Γ is a second level predicate applying to the perfections (and E, if necessary).

[5]See Priest (2005), 4.2.

[6]For Hilbert's theory, see Leisenring (1969). Russell's theory first appeared in Russell (1905).

[7]Hick (1964), pp. 37-8.

> I call every simple quality which is positive and absolute, or expresses whatever it expresses without limits, a *perfection*.
>
> But a quality of this sort, because it is simple, is therefore irresolvable or indefinable, for otherwise, it will not be a simple quality but an aggregate of many, or, if it is one, it will be circumscribed by limits and so be known through negations of further progress contrary to the hypothesis, for a purely positive quality was assumed.
>
> For let the proposition be of this kind:
>
> A and B are incompatible
>
> (for understanding by A and B two simple forms of this kind of perfections, and it is the same if more are assumed like them), it is evident that it cannot be demonstrated without the resolution of the terms A and B, of each or both; for otherwise their nature would not enter into the ratiocination and the incompatibility could be demonstrated as well from any others as from themselves. But now (by hypothesis) they are irresolvable. Therefore this proposition cannot be demonstrated from these forms.
>
> But it certainly might be demonstrated by these if it were true, because it is not true *per se*, for all propositions necessarily true are either demonstrable or known *per se*. Therefore, this proposition is not necessarily true. Or if it is not necessary that A and B exist in the same subject, they cannot therefore exist in the same subject, and since the reasoning is the same as regards any other assumed qualities of this kind, therefore all perfections are compatible.
>
> It is granted, therefore, that either a subject of all perfections or the most perfect being can be known
>
> Whence it is evident that it also exists, since existence is contained in the number of perfections.

Leibniz—being a better logician than Descartes—realises that the CP cannot hold in full generality. For it to hold, he claims, the properties in the enumeration of the characterisation must be compatible. Otherwise, for example, we could show the existence of a round square, by applying the CP to the description $\varepsilon x(Ex \wedge x \text{ is round} \wedge x \text{ is square})$.

Leibniz offers an argument that the perfections are mutually compatible, but we can set this aside for the moment. (We will come back to the matter later in the essay.) The reason is that this version of the CP is still too strong. Let Q_1x be 'x is a horse-like creature', and Q_2x be 'x has a horn on the middle of its forehead'. Then Ex, Q_1x, and Q_2x are mutually compatible. There *could*, after all, have been unicorns. But using the CP in this form we can show that there actually are, since if u is the description $\varepsilon x(Ex \wedge Q_1x \wedge Q_2x)$, it gives us: $Eu \wedge Q_1u \wedge Q_2u$. And quite generally, if P is any property such that it is possible that something instantiates it, we can prove that there exists something that actually does so, by considering the characterisation $\varepsilon x(Ex \wedge Px)$. This is clearly unacceptable. (I note, in case this is not entirely obvious, that considerations of non-existent objects—"Meinongianism"—are completely irrelevant here. We are not proving that something is P; we are proving that something is existent and P.)

2.3 Kant

So let us move on to Kant. Unlike Descartes and Leibniz, he (famously) though that the ontological argument does not work. His discussion of the matter is in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, A592=B620 to A603=B631. He starts this by saying (in his own inimitable way) that of course you can think about God, characterised as a necessarily existent being, but the mere fact of this does not guarantee that there is such a thing (A593=B621):[8]

> In all ages men have spoken of an *absolutely necessary* being, and in doing so have endeavoured, not so much as to understand whether and how a thing of this kind allows even of being thought, but rather to prove its existence. There is, of course, no difficulty in giving a verbal definition of the concept, namely that it is something the non-existence of which is impossible. But this gives no insight into the conditions which make it necessary to regard the non-existence of a thing as absolutely unthinkable. It is precisely those conditions that we desire to know, in order that we may determine whether or not, in resorting to this concept, we are thinking of anything at all.

What might such conditions be?

[8]Translations from the *Critique* are taken from Kemp Smith (1933).

Kant considers an obvious suggestion. The claim that 'a thing that necessarily exists, necessarily exists' (an instance of the CP) might appear to be necessarily true, so that its negation is a contradiction. But this, Kant denies. If 'a thing that necessarily exists' refers to something, it *is* a contradiction. But if it refers to nothing, it is not. Quite generally (A595=B623):

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

In other words, if $\varepsilon x A(x)$ denotes something (existent), then $A(\varepsilon x A(x))$ is true; but if it does not, it may be false.

He continues:

> We have seen that if the predicate of a judgment is rejected together with its subject, no internal contradiction can result, and that this holds no matter what the predicate is. The only way of evading this conclusion is to argue that there are subjects that cannot be removed, and must always remain. That, however, would only be another way of saying that there are absolutely necessary subjects; and that is the very assumption I have called into question, and the possibility of which the above argument is meant to establish.

In other words, simply to assume in an application of the CP that the subject $\varepsilon x A(x)$ must denote something is just to beg the question. Indeed it does, since it is entails $\exists x A(x)$.

Kant's demolition of the CP, and so of the ontological argument, is essentially over; but he goes on to consider a possible objection. This is to the effect that when $A(x)$ contains the existence predicate, matters are different. The objection has clearly failed to grasp the point, and Kant shows his frustration at the ineptitude of such an objector (A598=B626, italics original):

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

> is, a predicate, which determines a thing) is almost beyond correction. Anything we please can be made to serve as a logical predicate; the subject can even be predicated of itself; for logic abstracts from all content. But a *determining* predicate is a predicate which is added to the concept of the subject which enlarges it. Consequently, it must not already be contained in the concept
>
> '*Being*' is not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations, as existing in themselves.

In other words, there is no difference between a P and an existing P. So throwing the existence predicate into the characterisation makes absolutely no difference. He goes on (A599=B627) to illustrate the point: there is no difference between 100 thalers and 100 existing thalers. These concepts come to the same thing.

Now, it is not at all clear that a P and an existing P are always the same thing. An existing P is certainly a P; and for some Ps, a P is an existing P. A thaler is a concrete bank note. It is in space/time, and so exists. So a thaler is an existent thaler. But this is not true for all Ps. A fictional character is one which appears in a work of fiction. Some fictional characters exist (like Napoleon in *War and Peace* and Gladstone in the Holmes stories) and some do not (like Holmes himself and Gandalf in *Lord of the Rings*). So a fictional character is not necessarily an existing fictional character.

This is beside the point, though. For Kant had already demolished the ontological argument before this. If there are no Ps then 'a thing which is P is P' is not true. And this is so for any P, whether it contains the existence predicate or not.

3 Anselm of Canterbury

3.1 Anselm

Having dealt with the ontological argument in early Modern Philosophy, let us now backtrack and deal with the mother of all ontological arguments—Anselm's. In Chapter 2 of his *Proslogion*, Anselm states the argument (addressed to God!), as follows:[9]

> Is there, then, no such nature as You, for the Fool has said in his heart that God does not exist? But surely when this very Fool hears the words 'something nothing greater than which can be thought', he understands what he hears. And what he understands is in his understanding, even if he does not understand [judge] it to exist... But surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot be only in the understanding. For if it were only in the understanding, it could be thought to exist in reality—which is greater [than existing only in the understanding]. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought existed only in the understanding, then that than which a greater *cannot* be thought would be that than which a greater *can* be thought! But surely this conclusion is impossible. Hence, without doubt, something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality.

How to understand Anselm's argument is not at all obvious. It is clearly a *reductio* argument, but beyond that, the logical details are somewhat murky.[10] Fairly obviously, God is characterised in a certain way, as a being no greater than which can be thought. So if τx is 'x is thought of', let g be the description $\varepsilon x \neg \exists z(\tau z \wedge z > x)$. I note that quantifiers here must be understood as not existentially loaded: they range over things that may or may not exist.[11] Harder to understand is what, exactly it is, which is supposed to be greater than g. It is something which is exactly the same, except that it exists. So let us take g^* to be the description $\varepsilon x(Ex \wedge \forall P(P \neq E \rightarrow (Px \leftrightarrow Pg))$. Now suppose, for *reductio*, that g does not exist, $\neg Eg$. Then $g^* > g$. (More on this in a second.) But, as is clear, τg^*. (You are thinking about it now.) Hence $\tau g^* \wedge g^* > g$. So $\exists z(\tau z \wedge z > g)$. Applying the CP to g gives us $\neg \exists z(\tau z \wedge z > g)$, which is the contradiction required for *reductio*.[12]

[9]Hopkins and Richard (1974).

[10]What follows draws on Priest (1995), 4.1, though it is slightly simpler.

[11]In this essay, I use $\exists$ as an existentially loaded quantifier unless otherwise noted.

[12]I note that in Anselm's description for God, he uses a modal operator, 'can'. It is not clear where to insert this in the description for g: $\varepsilon x \neg \Diamond \exists z(\tau z \wedge z > x)$, $\varepsilon x \neg \exists z \Diamond(\tau z \wedge z > x)$, $\varepsilon x \neg \exists z(\Diamond \tau z \wedge z > x)$, $\varepsilon x \neg \exists z(\tau z \wedge \Diamond z > x)$. In fact, it makes very little difference. For what would need to be established as possible in each case is established as actual (and so possible). So the modal operator is doing no real work. I therefore omitted it to simplify things.

Why is $g^* > g$? It is because g and g^* are alike in all respects, except that g does not exist and g^* does. One might wonder why this makes g^* greater, but let us pass this over. $\neg Eg$ by assumption; to get Eg^*, one needs to apply the CP to $g*$ to get: $Eg^* \wedge \forall P(P \neq E \rightarrow (Pg^* \leftrightarrow Pg))$.

How, exactly, to reconstruct the argument might certainly be contested. But what is clear is that the CP is required to establish that nothing thought of is greater than g. And probably it is also required to establish that Eg^*. The CP is therefore crucial to the argument, as are the problems I have already discussed in virtue of this.[13]

3.2 Gaunilo

Anselm's argument drew immediate criticism from Gaunilo. In 'On Behalf of the Fool', Gaunilo presented a *reductio* of Anselm's *reductio*. This went as follows:[14]

> Consider this example: Certain people say that somewhere in the ocean is an island, which they call the "Lost Island" because of the difficulty or, rather, impossibility of finding what does not exist. They say that it is more abundantly filled with inestimable riches and delights then the Isles of the Blessed, and that although it has no owner or inhabitant, it excels all the lands that men inhabit taken together in the unceasing abundance of its fertility.
>
> When someone tells me that there is such an island, I easily understand what is being said, for there is nothing difficult here. Suppose, however, as a consequence of this, that he goes on to say: "You cannot doubt that this island, more excellent than all lands, actually exists somewhere in reality, because it undoubtedly stands in relation to your understanding. Since it is more excellent, not simply to stand in relation to the understanding, but to be in reality as well, therefore this island must necessarily be in reality. Otherwise, any other island would be more excellent than this island, and this island, which you understand to be the most excellent of lands, would not then be the most excellent.

[13] A somewhat different reconstruction of the argument is given by Oppenheimer and Zalta (1991). But as they point out, a version of the CP, in the form of Description Theorem 2 (p. 514), is central to it.

[14] Hick and McGill (1967), pp. 22-3.

> If, I repeat, someone should wish by this argument to demonstrate to me that this island truly exists and is no longer to be doubted, I would think he were joking; or, if I accepted the argument, I do not know whom I would regard as the greater fool, me for accepting it, or him for supposing that he had proved the existence of this island with any kind of certainty.

Gaunilo does not attempt to show where Anselm's argument goes wrong. He merely argues that it cannot be sound, since an exactly parallel argument establishes the existence of an island no greater ('more excellent') than which can be conceived. The island is merely an example, and the argument clearly generalises to any kind of entity. And Gaunilo is quite right. Let $A(x)$ be any condition whatsoever. Define g, this time, as $\varepsilon x \neg \exists z(\tau z \wedge z > x \wedge A(x))$. Then the argument runs in exactly the same way, and its conclusion is that Eg, i.e., that something satisfying the condition $A(x)$ exists. This is too much, as I pointed out with respect to Leibniz' formulation of the argument.

Anselm was aware of Gaunilo's criticism, and noted a reply, as follows:[15]

> I can confidently say that if someone discovers for me something existing either in fact or at least in thought, other than that which "a greater cannot be conceived", and apply the logic of my argument to it, I shall find the "Lost Island" for him and shall give it to him as something he will never lose again.

The reply is opaque. Is Anselm saying that the argument does not apply to arbitrary As? In that case he is wrong. Or is he simply accepting the conclusion of the supposed *reductio*, so that there exists a novel no greater than which can be conceived, a person no greater than which can be conceived, a political state no greater than which can be conceived? That way, it would seem, lies madness.[16]

[15] Hick and McGill (1967), p. 23.

[16] Hick (1971), p. 78, suggests that Anselm thinks that the argument works only for necessarily existent beings, not contingently existing beings, such as islands. But that g (or g^*) is a necessary being is nowhere appealed to in the argument. Indeed, using the argument, one can show that the island and its like are necessary beings. Just redefine g as $\varepsilon x \neg \exists z(\tau z \wedge z > x \wedge A(x) \wedge \Box Ex)$

4 To Exist

4.1 Frege

After dealing with this bit of history, let us return Modern Philosophy, and specifically its later parts. Clearly, the ontological argument involves the notion of existence, and given modern developments in logic concerning quantification and existence, one might well suppose that this has some bearing on the argument. Let us see.

Start with Frege.[17] In a very well known passage, Frege says that existence is a property of a concept. That is, it is expressed by the particular quantifier ('particular', as opposed to 'universal'). He says:[18]

> I have called existence a property of a concept. How I mean this to be taken is best made clear by an example. In the sentence 'there is at least one square root of 4,' we have an assertion not about (say) the definite number 2, nor about −2, but about a concept *square root of* 4; viz. that it is not empty.

And in Section 53 of *Foundations of Arithmetic*, Frege writes casually, 'Because existence is a property of concepts, the ontological argument for the existence of God breaks down'.[19] No further explanation is given. So why does it break down?

In a much less well-known passage of Frege, commenting on Peano, he says:[20]

> Existential sentences, beginning 'there is' ('*es gibt*'), are closely related to particular ones: compare the sentence 'there are numbers which are prime' with 'some numbers are prime'. This existence is still too often confused with reality and objectivity.

His point is this. By all means use the phrase *there exists* as meaning *some* if you wish. That is a very standard way for mathematicians to talk. But don't confuse this with a heavy-duty notion of existence. It's just a manner of speaking.

[17] What follows draws on the second edition of Priest (2005), 18.3.2.
[18] Geach and Black (1970), pp. 48-9.
[19] Austin (1968), p. 65e.
[20] McGuiness (1984), p. 239.

So what has this to do with the ontological argument? In the academic year of 1910-11, Frege lectured on the ontological argument. The lectures were attended by Carnap, whose notes have recently been published.[21] In these, Frege explains that *existence* may mean either a first-order property of an object or a second-order property of a concept, to the effect that something satisfies it. One can take the first-order concept to be a part of the definition of 'God'. However, 'we always want to ask ourselves whether there really is such a thing', i.e., whether *something* satisfies the concept. Frege's objection to the ontological argument is, then, essentially the same as Kant's. $Ex \wedge P_1x \wedge ... \wedge P_nx$ is a perfectly good concept, but the mere fact that Ex is part of it does nothing to show that something satisfies it.

4.2 Russell

In 'On Denoting', Russell also makes a brief comment on the ontological argument. He phrases the argument as: The most perfect Being has all perfections; existence is a perfection; therefore that one exists. Using his theory of descriptions, he expands this as:[22]

> There is one and only one entity x that is most perfect; that one has all perfections; existence is a perfection; therefore that one exists.

He then notes the consequent failure of the argument:[23]

> As a proof, this fails for want of a proof of the premiss 'there is one and only one entity x which is most perfect'.

His point, then, is exactly the same as Frege's. Given a concept, you need an argument that something satisfies it, even if the concept has existence as a part.

Note that though, in the argument 'the most perfect Being' is analysed in terms of the theory of definite descriptions, there is no attempt to parse away the monadic existence predicate.

Things change markedly by the time Russell comes to give his lectures on logical atomism (1918). Here he argues that a monadic existence predicate is meaningless. Existence is a second-order concept, expressible by the

[21]Reck and Awodey (2014), pp. 80-81.
[22]Russell (1905), p. 117 of reprint.
[23] *Loc. cit.*

particular quantifier. Russell's arguments are dismal. Here I note only one of them.[24] This goes as follows:[25]

> If you say 'Men exist, and Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates exists', this is the same sort of fallacy as it would be if you said 'Men are numerous, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is numerous', because existence is a predicate of a propositional function, or derivatively of a class. When you say of a propositional function that it is numerous, you will mean that there are several values of x that will satisfy it, that there are more than one; or, if you like to take 'numerous' in a larger sense, more than ten, more than twenty, or whatever number you think fitting. If x, y, and z all satisfy a propositional function, you may say that that proposition is numerous, but x, y, and z severally are not. Exactly the same applies to existence, that is to say that the actual things there are in the world do not exist, or, at least, that is putting it too strongly, because that is utter nonsense. To say that they do not exist is strictly nonsense, but to say that they exist is also strictly nonsense.

Russell asks us to compare two inferences:

Men exist	Men are numerous
<u>Socrates is a man</u>	<u>Socrates is a man</u>
Socrates exists	Socrates is numerous

and claims that the same sort of fallacy is involved in both. We are supposed to conclude that the conclusion of the first is ungrammatical, as is that of the second. But the analogy is lame. To say that men are numerous is indeed to say that many things are men. In the right context, this is true, as is the other premise. The conclusion, however, is *clearly* nonsense. The inference is therefore fallacious. The first argument, too, is fallacious. But that is simply because it is of the form:

Some things which are men are existent
<u>Socrates is a man</u>
Socrates exists

[24]For an analysis of the whole set of arguments, see the second edition of Priest (2005), 18.3.4.

[25]Pears (1972), p. 67 of the second edition.

Note that the corresponding inference with a universal major premise seems perfectly valid:

All things which are men are existent
Socrates is a man
Socrates exists

In 'Sylvan's Box' I tell a story about the late Richard Sylvan.[26] It happens to be the case that all the people in the story are real people. So it is perfectly correct to argue thus: All the people in the story exist. Nick Griffin is in the story. So Nick Griffin exists (unlike, say, the purely fictional Anna Karenina). And the conclusion of Russell's argument, that Socrates exists, is *prima facie* perfectly grammatical. Compare: 'Nick Griffin exists, but Anna Karenina does not'.

There is no mention of the ontological argument in Russell's lectures. But a few years later, in a short lecture on logical atomism, Russell spells out the consequence of his view for the ontological argument:[27]

> An important consequence of the theory of descriptions is that it is meaningless to say "A exists" unless "A" is (or stands for) a phrase of the form "the so-and-so". If the so-and-so exists, and x is the so-and-so, to say "x exists" is nonsense. Existence, in the sense in which it is ascribed to single entities, is thus removed altogether from the list of fundamentals. The ontological argument and most of its refutations are found to depend upon bad grammar.

The thought would seem to be this. Since there is no such thing as a meaningful monadic existence predicate, the characterisation $Ex \wedge P_1x \wedge ... \wedge P_nx$, where the Ps are the perfections, is also meaningless, as, therefore, is any argument employing it.

However, not only does Russell not have any good arguments against a monadic existence predicate, and not only are statements such as 'God exists' clearly meaningful[28]—indeed its truth is the subject of much contention—the

[26] See Priest (2005), 6.6.

[27] Russell (1925), page reference to the reprint.

[28] Russell does have a possible way out here, as reference to the theory of descriptions indicates. He might suggest that the proper name 'God' is a covert definite description (e.g., 'a being with all the perfections'). However, names are not covert descriptions. For

view is false even by Russell's own lights. Given that existence is expressed by the particular quantifier, and given that we have an identity predicate, a monadic existence predicate, Ex can be defined simply as $\exists y\, y = x$. It may be a universal predicate, in that it applies to everything, but meaningless it is not. Neither is there anything in the universality of the predicate which, of itself, invalidates the ontological argument.

4.3 Meinong

Let me finish this section of the discussion with a few comments on Meinong and the CP. In his early writings, it does appear that Meinong endorses the naive CP. He certainly endorses instances of it, such as that the golden mountain is golden and a mountain, and that the round square is round and square.

The naive CP was attacked by Russell in his post-'On Denoting' critique of Meinong.[29] Russell's objections were essentially two. The first is that the round square violates the principle of non-contradiction. If it is round, it is not square, so it is square and not square. Meinong accepted this, saying that of course impossible objects can violate the principle, though he later clarified that the negation in question was predicate negation, not sentential negation. He took the law of non-contradiction to hold for sentential negation. If so, the CP cannot hold completely generally, though what an appropriate restriction might be, Meinong never said.

Russell's second objection—and the one germane to present matters—is essentially Gaunilo's. According to the naive CP, the existent King of France exists (and is King of France). Meinong replied that it is indeed existent, but does not exist. Russell, replied that he could see no difference, and it is hard to demur. Maybe, by analogy with the case for negation, Meinong was thinking of 'existent' as a predicate modifier. But again, there must be a restriction on the CP using an existence predicate: Meinong did not accept the Ontological Argument.[30] But again, what such restrictions might be, he does not say.

example, they have different logical properties. Descriptions show differences of scope in modal contexts; proper names do not. As is generally accepted, the view that names are covert descriptions was demolished by Kripke (1972).

[29]For a full discussion and the references to the Russell/Meinong exchange, see Marek 4.4.

[30]See Marek (2008), 4.4.2.

Meinong, then, left the CP in a very unsatisfactory state. Neo-Meinongians have cleaned matters up. There are currently three ways in which this has been attempted. The first,[31] is to distinguish between two sorts of predicates, nuclear and non-nuclear. For the CP, $A(\varepsilon x A(x))$, to hold, all the predicates in $A(x)$ have to be nuclear. Being golden and being a mountain are nuclear; but the existence predicate (or a predicate containing sentential negation) is not. The second way[32] is to distinguish between two modes of predication, instantiation and encoding. $\varepsilon x A(x)$ will always encode $A(x)$ (strictly speaking, as long as $A(x)$ does not itself contain the encoding symbol), but it will instantiate it only if something (or some existing thing, depending on how one interprets the particular quantifier) satisfies $A(x)$. A third way[33] is to hold that $A(\varepsilon x A(x))$ always holds, but it may not hold at this world; it may hold at other (possible or impossible) worlds. It holds at this world if something (not necessarily something existent) actually satisfies $A(x)$.

This is not the place to go into these variations further,[34] since in none of them is $\varepsilon x(Ex \wedge P_1 x \wedge ... \wedge P_n x)$ guaranteed to satisfy $Ex \wedge P_1 x \wedge ... \wedge P_n x$. So none of them does anything to help the ontological argument.

5 Later Versions of the Argument

5.1 Hartshorne

In the final section of this essay, I want to take up two more contemporary forms of the argument. The first was given by Hartshorne, and is an essentially modal argument.[35] He claims to find this in Anselm's *Proslogion*, Chapter 3 (that is, the chapter after the one I discussed in 3.1), and it goes essentially as follows.

Let Px be 'x is a perfect being', and let H be $\exists x Px$. The argument has two premises:

1. $\Box(H \rightarrow \Box H)$

[31] To be found, for example, in Parsons (1980).

[32] To be found, for example, in Zalta (1983).

[33] To be found, for example, in Priest (2005).

[34] Matters are discussed further in Reicher (2014), Berto (2012), and the Preface to the second edition of Priest (2005).

[35] Hartshorne (1962), pp. 49-57. This is reprinted as pp. 334-340 of Hick and McGill (1967). Similar arguments were given by Malcolm (1960) and Plantinga (1974).

2. $\Diamond H$

Here, $\Box$ expresses analyticity,[36] though the argument might also—and perhaps more profitably—be run for metaphysical necessity. The modal logic employed is S5. The argument then goes essentially as follows.[37] In S5, $\Box(A \to B) \vdash \Diamond A \to \Diamond B$. Applying this to 1 gives $\Diamond H \to \Diamond\Box H$. But in S5 $\Diamond\Box A \to A$. Hence $\Diamond H \to H$. By Premise 2, H follows.

One may have some worries about whether the modal logic for the requisite notion of necessity is S5, but the view is plausible enough. This leaves the two premises.

For premise 1: Let us define Px as $\Box Ex \wedge P_0 x \wedge ... \wedge P_n x$, where the P_is enumerate the (other) perfections. Let g be the description $\varepsilon x(\Box Ex \wedge P_0 x \wedge ... \wedge P_n x)$. Then by an uncontentious version of the CP, $\exists x Px \to Pg$. Moreover, $Pg \to \Box Eg$. Further, $\Box(Pg \to \exists x Px)$, and so $\Box Pg \to \Box\exists x Px$. Chaining these three things together gives us: $\exists x Px \to \Box\exists x Px$. Finally, this has all been established by *a priori* reasoning, and so is necessary. That is, $\Box(\exists x Px \to \Box\exists x Px)$

Matters are less plausible with respect to premise 2. Necessity has many meanings. One is epistemic. And it certainly seems to be right that the existence of God is epistemically possible. But that is not the notion of necessity in play here. It is worth noting that the fact that $\Diamond H$ is an explict premise of the argument allows a reply to the objection that the argument could be run for any H. Suppose that P characterises a necessarily existent island or unicorn. Unicorns, islands, and their like, are contingent existences. So a necessarily existent one is a contradiction in terms: the statement that it is possible for one to exist is false.

Be that as it may, it is not clear that the premise is true for the required notion of necessity. Things may be impossible in the required way without one realising it. Thus, the claim that there is a greatest prime number is impossible, but someone uneducated in number theory might not realise this. And even for someone who is so educated, there will be statements, A, which are theorems of, say, Peano Arithmetic, which are not known to be so. Hence $\neg A$ is impossible, but not realised to be such.

The worry is enhanced by the fact that, as we saw, $\Diamond H \to H$. So $\neg H \to \neg\Diamond H$, that is, $\neg H \to \Box\neg H$. So if H is false it is necessarily false. In other words H is either a necessary truth or a necessary falsity; and both

[36] Hartshorne (1962), p. 337 of reprint.

[37] Hartshorne's argument is more cumbersome than necessary. Here I streamline it.

seem equally plausible. One might try to invoke the fact that we can at least conceive H to be true, and since what is conceivable is possible, H is possible. But this is a bad move. Conceivability is not a good test of possibility.[38] But even if it were, $\neg H$ seems equally conceivable. So we are no better off.

I note, moreover, that $H \rightarrow \Diamond H$ in S5; given that $\Diamond H \rightarrow H$, H is equivalent to $\Diamond H$. So to assume Premise 2, is to assume H, and so beg the question.

Finally, there are real worries concerning whether the perfections are consistent, and so about Premise 2. Thus, God is omnipotent and so can do anything. But God is morally perfect, and so cannot do anything wrong. One may even worry that single perfections are not consistent. God is omnipotent, and so can create a stone that so great that it cannot be lifted. So God can limit God's own power. But an omnipotent being cannot have their power limited. There is a substantial literature on these matters, and this is not the place to go into it.[39] It does take us, however, into the final argument we will consider.

5.2 Gödel

At some point in the 1940s and 50s (and so before Hartshorne's proof), Gödel developed an ontological argument, a version of which was published posthumously.[40] The note is terse (just over one printed page), and sometimes cryptic, but it is clear that the argument is inspired by Leibniz' argument.

The argument is couched in a higher order modal logic (S5). Crucial to it is the notion of a positive property. No definition is given. Gödel glosses it, somewhat opaquely, as follows:[41]

> Positive means positive in the moral aesthetic sense (independently of the accidental structure of the world). Only then [are]

[38]See Priest (2005), 2nd edn, ch. 9.

[39]To give just a few examples: Cowan (2003), Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2006), Blumenfield (2003), Kretzman (1966). A much longer list of references can be found in McCormick (2016).

[40]In Feferman (1995), pp. 388-404. There is a substantial and helpful introduction by Robert Adams. Hazen (1995) is also a helpful commentary. For those with a taste for matters formal, Fitting (2002), ch. 11, contains an excellent presentation. There is no evidence to suppose that Gödel thought that the argument actually worked. In what follows, I modernise Gödel's notation.

[41]Feferman (1995), p. 404. The material in square brackets are the editors interpolations, and the italics are original.

> the axioms true. It may also mean pure "attribution" <Footnote: I.e., the disjunctive normal form in terms of elementary properties contains a member without negation.> as opposed to "privation" (or *containing* privation). This interpretation [supports a] simpler proof.

The predicate $G(x)$, 'x is God', is defined as 'x has all positive properties'. (In fact, Gödel's axioms then imply that x has exactly the positive properties.) For the argument to be an argument for the existence of *God*, it would have to be the case that all the perfections are positive properties. Whether this is so is unclear, due to the unclarity of what it is to be positive, but certainly some of the standard perfections don't look very positive. Thus, to be unchanging is *not* to change.

The argument then comes in two stages. For the first, there is a predicate Qx concerning essences, and an axiom to the effect that being Q is positive.[42] Given this, if x is God then Qx, and from this and the definition of Q, it follows that if x is God then x necessarily exists. Gödel's argument here (not spelled out in the note), concerns a certain notion of what an essence is (namely, the essence of an object is a property that entails all of its properties). This is certainly a contentious notion of essence, even for those who accept that there are essences.[43] And I must confess that this part of the argument strikes me as needlessly complex. Much simpler would have been to say that the property of necessary existence is positive. That is, if Nx is $\Box Ex$ —or, if you don't like that, $\Box\exists y\, y = x$—then N is perfect.[44] It seems to me that it is just as intuitive to suppose that N is positive as to suppose that Q is—maybe even more so. (Nor is there a problem about having a modal operator in a positive property, since the definition of Q has one.[45])

[42]Gödel uses the letter E instead of Q. I change this to avoid confusion with an existence predicate.

[43]Moreover, there is a problem with it, as noted by Sobel (1987). Let A be any true statement, and consider the property expressed by $A \wedge x = x$. This is a property of God, so God's essence entails that God has it. But God's essence is necessary, so A is necessary. In other words, Gödel's axioms entail that $A \rightarrow \Box A$. One may rework the axioms to try to avoid this consequence. (See Fitting (2002), pp. 163-171.) However, perhaps Leibniz himself would not have been too troubled by it. For him, every true statement can indeed by inferred *a priori* by an agent (such as God, whom, after all, we are dealing with here), capable of "infinite analysis". (See, e.g., Look (2013), section 2.)

[44]In constant-domain modal logic, it is a logical truth that $\forall x \Box\exists y\, y = x$; but in variable-domain modal logic it is not.

[45]Gödel's apparatus does avoid the use of first-order *de re* machinery (that is, quantifi-

It then follows very simply that if something is God they necessarily exists.

At any rate, we have the conditional $\exists x Gx \to \Box \exists y Gy$. The argument then proceeds as in Hartshorne:

$$\Box(\exists x Gx \to \Box \exists y Gy)$$
$$\Diamond \exists x Gx \to \Diamond \Box \exists y Gy$$
$$\Diamond \exists x Gx \to \exists y Gy$$

Each step follows in S5.

Hartshorne takes it to be evident that $\Diamond \exists x Gx$; Gödel does not. He gives an argument for this. This is the second part of his ontological argument, and it is a variant of Leibniz' argument that the perfections are compossible. This goes as follows. Being God is essentially having the property $\bigwedge_{i \in I} P_i$, where $\{P_i : i \in I\}$ is the set of all positive properties. Gödel now lists three axioms. Axiom 1 tells us that if Q_1 and Q_2 are positive so is their conjunction. (A footnote adds 'And for any number of summands'.) So $\bigwedge_{i \in I} P_i$ is positive.

Axiom 5 tells us that if Q_1 is positive, and being Q_1 strictly implies being Q_2, then Q_2 is positive. It follows that the property expressed by $x = x$ is positive. Axiom 2 tells us that if Q is positive, its negation is not. So the property expressed by $x \neq x$ is not positive.

Gödel then argues:[46]

> if a system S of positive properties were incompatible, it would mean that the sum property, s (which is positive) would be $x \neq x$.

Thus, if $\bigwedge_{i \in I} P_i$ were inconsistent, it would entail the property expressed by $x \neq x$. So this would have to be positive, which it is not.

How plausible these three axioms are is somewhat moot, because, again, of the unclarity of the notion of being positive. But, together, they are problematic. Being red would seem to be a positive property if anything is; but so does being green. (There certainly seems to be no negation sign in their disjunctive normal forms!) Being red and green is not a satisfiable property.[47] If it is not positive, we have a counter-example to Axiom 1. So

---

cation into the scope of a modal operator), though not second-order. Perhaps one might take this to be an advantage.

[46] Feferman (1995), p. 404.

[47] It is worth remembering the it was consideration of colour predicates which caused Wittgenstein to start to dismantle the *Tractatus*, since they show that atomic states of affairs can be incompatible. See Wittgenstein (1929).

suppose it is. x is red and x is green strictly implies $x \neq x$. (There is no possible world in which something is red and green.) Then either we have a counterexample to Axiom 5 (strict implication does not preserve positivity) or Axiom 2 ($x \neq x$ is positive).

Of course, $\Box((x \text{ is red } \wedge x \text{ is green}) \rightarrow x \neq x)$ is not a theorem of S5. But to restrict the meaning of Axiom 5 to things that are formally provable, seems entirely arbitrary. Moreover, the point obviously generalises to any family of exclusive predicates. So consider arithmetic. The predicates $x = 0, x = 1, x = 2, ...$ form such a family. $x = 0 \wedge x = 1$ is not satisfiable, and $\Box((x = 0 \wedge x = 1) \rightarrow x \neq x)$ is a theorem of, say, Peano Arithmetic (extended with a standard modal operator). Finally, it must be remembered that what is really at issue here are the perfections (being omniscient, being unchangeable, etc). Nothing about these is formally provable in S5 either. So Gödel's machinery must extend beyond what is formally provable in that system.

And of course, if the perfections are, indeed, positive, to suppose that they are not like red and green, is exactly to assume what needs to be proved, viz., the consistency of the perfections—and so begs the question.

The role of the CP in Gödel's version of the Ontological Argument is not evident; but it is there, just covered up by the fact that the argument does not use descriptions. Essentially, God is defined as the object with all positive properties. One of these is Q. A legitimate version of the CP tells us that if God exists, they have the property Q. Q is not quite necessary existence (despite Gödel's gloss on its definition). Rather, it is a property such that having it ensures that God necessarily exists (though this has to be untangled from Gödel's definitions involving essences)—which is Hartshorn's Premise 1.

6 Conclusion

Much more has been said about the ontological argument than I have commented on here. But we have looked at some of the most significant things that have been said about the argument in the history of Western philosophy. What we have seen is that at the core of the argument is the Characterisation Principle, a naive version of which cannot be held. Existence not being a predicate has nothing whatsoever to do with the matter (even for Kant). What has everything to do with the matter is whether some restricted version of the CP can be established—a restricted version that applies when the characterisation is that of God. No way of doing this without begging the question seems possible.[48]

References

[1] Austin, J. L. (tr.) (1968), *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

[2] Berto, F. (2012), *Existence as a Real Propert*y, Dordrecht, Springer: Synthese Library.

[3] Blumenfeld, D. (2003), 'On the Compossibility of the Divine Attributes' in *The Impossibility of God*, M. Martin and R. Monnier (eds.), Amherst, NY: Prometheus Press.

[4] Cowan, J. L. (2003), 'The Paradox of Omnipotence', in *The Impossibility of God*, M. Martin and R. Monnier (eds.), Amherst, NY: Prometheus Press.

[5] Feferman, S. (ed.) (1995), *Kurt Gödel, Collected Works*, Vol III: *Unpublished Essay and Lectures*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

[6] Fitting, M. (2002), *Types, Tableaus and GÃ¶del's God*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

[7] Geach, P., and Black, M. (eds. and trs.) (1970), *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

[8] Hartshorne, C. (1962), *The Logic of Perfection*, LaSalle, IL: Open Court.

[9] Hazen, A. (1998), 'On Gödel's Ontological Proof', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 76: 361-77.

[10] Hick, J. (1964), *The Existence of God*, New York, NY: The Macmillan Company.

[11] Hick, J. (1971), *Arguments for the Existence of God*, New York, NY: Herder and Herder.

[48] Many thanks go to Allen Hazen, for helpful discussions.

[12] Hick, J., and McGill, A. (eds.) (1967), *The Many Faced Argument*, New York, NY: The Macmillan Company.

[13] Hoffman, J., and Rosenkrantz, G. (2006), 'Omnipotence', in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/omnipotence/.

[14] Hopkins, J., and Richardson, H. (trs.) (1974), *Anselm of Canterbury*, Vol. 1, New York, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.

[15] Kemp Smith, N. (tr.) (1933), *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd edn, London: Macmillan & Co.

[16] Kretzmann, N. (1966), 'Omniscience and Immutability', *Journal of Philosophy* 63: 409-21.

[17] Kripke, S. (1972), 'Naming and Necessity', pp. 253-355 of D. Davidson and G. Harman (eds.), *Semantics of Natural Language*, Dordrecht: Reidel; reprinted as as *Naming and Necessity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.

[18] Leisenring, A. C. (1969), *Mathematical Logic and Hilbert's ε-Symbol*, London: Macdonald Technical and Scientific.

[19] Look, B. (2013), 'Leibniz's Modal Metaphysics', in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/leibniz-modal/. (Accessed August 2016.)

[20] Malcolm, N. (1960), 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments', *Philosophical Review* 69: 41–62; reprinted as pp. 301-20 of Hick and McGill (1967).

[21] Marek, J. (2008), 'Alexius Meinong', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/meinong/. (Accessed May 2016.)

[22] McCormick, M. (2016), 'Atheism', in J. Feiser and B. Dowdan (eds.), *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://www.iep.utm.edu/atheism/. (Accessed May 2016.)

[23] McGuinness, B. (ed.) (1984), 'On Mr. Peano's Conceptual Notation and My Own', pp. 234-48 of *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

[24] Oppenheimer, P., and Zalta, E. (1991), 'On the Logic of the Ontological Argument', *Philosophy of Religion* 5: 509-29.

[25] Oppy, G. (2016), 'Ontological Arguments', in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ontological-arguments/. (Accessed May 2016.)

[26] Parsons, T. (1980), *Non-Existent Objects*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

[27] Pears, D. F. (ed.) (1972), *Russell's Logical Atomism*, London: Fontana; 2nd edn, Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2010.

[28] Plantinga, A. (1974), *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[29] Priest, G. (1995), *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, Oxford: Oxford Uiversity Press; 2nd (extended) edn, 2002.

[30] Priest, G. (2005), *Towards Non-Being*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2nd (extended) edn, 2016.

[31] Reck, E. H., and Awodey, S. (trs.) (2004), *Frege's Lectures on Logic: Carnap's Student Notes, 1910-1914*, Chicago, IL: Open Court.

[32] Reicher, M. (2014), 'Non-Existent Objects', in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nonexistent-objects/. (Accessed May 2016.)

[33] Russell, B. (1905), 'On Denoting', *Mind* 14: 479–93; reprinted as ch. 5 of D. Lackey (ed.), *Essays in Analysis*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1973.

[34] Russell, B. (1924), 'Logical Atomism', in J. H. Muirhead (ed.), *Contemporary British Philosophy*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1925; reprinted in the second edition of Pears (1972).

[35] Sobel, J. H. (1987), 'Gödel's Ontological Proof', pp. 241-61 of J. J. Thompson (ed.), *On Being and Saying: Essays for Richard Cartwright*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[36] Wittgenstein, L. (1929), 'Some Remarks on Logical Form', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplemantary Volume* 9: 162-171.

[37] Zalta, E. (1983), *Abstract Objects: an Introduction to Axiomatic Metaphysics*, Dordrecht: Reidel.