A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO REFUTING THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

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" . . .(T)he necessity which lies in the thing itself, that is, the necessity of the existence of God, determines me to think in this way, for it is not in my power to conceive a God without existence, that is a being supremely perfect and yet devoid of an absolute perfection as I am free to imagine a horse with or without wings (Descartes, The Meditations, meditation five)"[1] Here Descartes gives a classic restatement of Saint Anselm's ontological argument, which attempts to prove the existence of God by reason alone, without any sense experience at all. Such an a priori proof of God's existence is bound to be appealing to rationalist philosophers who are suspicious of the senses but certain of reasoning. All three of the major Continental Rationalist philosophers--Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibnitz--employed the onological argument, though their objectives and levels of enthusiasm for it varied. But despite the ontological argument is valid in form, it is unsound because of the equivocation it commits when it uses the word "exists."

Of course, since the rationalist philosophers were a varied lot, they had different purposes and levels of enthusiasm for the ontological argument. For instance, Leibnitz thought the argument was only partially useful: It was sound if only one proved God was a possible Being first. " . . . (C)ertain philosophers, ancient and modern, have constructed a demonstration of God that is extremely imperfect. It must be, they say, that I have an idea of God, or of a perfect being since I think of him and we cannot think without having ideas; now the idea of this being includes all perfections and since existence is one of these perfections, it follows that he exists. But I reply, inasmuch as we often think of impossible chimeras, for example of the highest degree of swiftness, of the greatest number, of the meeting of the chonchoid with its base or determinant, such reasoning is not sufficient. (Shades of Gaunilo's perfect island here--EVS) It is therefore in this sense that we can say that

[1]Descartes, The Rationalists (Anchor Books, Garden City, NY, 1974), p. 156.

there are true and false ideas according as the thing which is in question is possible or not. And it is when he is assured of the possibility of a thing, that one can boast of having an idea of it. Therefore, the aforesaid argument proves that God exists, if He is possible. This is in fact an excellent privilege of the divine nature, to have need only of a possibility or an essence in order to actually exist, and it is just this which is called self-sufficient being . . . (Leibnitz, Discourse On Metaphysics, XXII, my emphasis)."[2]

Thus, Leibnitz's view on the ontological argument seems to be a bit lukewarm at first glance since he abuses it as "extremely imperfect," but he went on to say that since a Perfect Being is possible, that this Being's essence is such that he needs only have "an essence in order to actually exist." What makes Leibnitz's attitude toward this argument interesting (he repeats his view in the Monadology, 43-45)[3] is how he separates the issues of whether the idea of God is self-contradictory from whether or not God's existence is presupposed by His essence. Leibnitz is saying that if the idea of God[4] is "possible" (i.e. no self-contradictory, like a round square), that then God must, of necessity, exist due to His essence. In short, the ontological argument proves God exists, but doesn't do the trick alone.

Now Spinoza was another kettle of fish entirely, in contrast to Leibnitz. Both Leibnitz and Descartes employed the ontological argument to prove the transcendant God of Christianity existed. By contrast, Spinoza, a Jew who went into apostasy by embracing pantheism, employed the ontological argument to prove his immanent God existed necessarily because of its essence. The opening shot for Spinoza's version of the Ontological argument is really in the first sentence of the Ethics: "By that which is self-caused, I mean that of which the essence involves existence, or that of which the nature is only conceivable as existent."[5] Of course, Spinoza's use of "existence" as a pred-

[2]Leibnitz, The Rationalists (Anchor Books, Garden City, NY, 1974), p. 436.
[3]Ibid., p. 462.
[4]The issue of whether or not the theistic idea of God is self-contradictory I shall return to.
[5]Spinoza, The Rationalists (Anchor Books, Garden City, NY, 1974), p. 179.

immediately to the astute reader
icate will bring to mind Kant's objection to the ontological argument in the Critique of Pure Reason. However, Spinoza gradually builds up to the ontological argument without explicitly or directly using definition I above to prove his point in the earlier propositions in the Ethics. One crucial step is proposition VII, where Spinoza asserts: "Existence belongs to the nature of substance. Proof.-Substance cannot be produced by anything external*(Corollary, prop. iv.), it must, therefore, be its own cause--that is, its essence necessarily involves existence, for existence belongs to its nature."[6] It is worth mentioning that Spinoza gets to proposition seven without using definition one in any of the previous propositions. Implicitly, Spinoza is saying, "So what you think definition one is arbitrary or false. I can prove the truth of definition one contains without using any form of that definition."

The cashing in of proposition seven and of what preceded it, is found in proposition eleven: "God, or substance, consisting of infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality, necessarily exists.--Proof. If this be denied, conceive, if possible, that God does not exist: Then his essence does not involve existence. But this (by Prop. VII) (Notice--NOT by def. I) is absurd. Therefore God necessarily exists. Another proof.--Of everything whatsoever a cause or reason must be assigned (the principle of the sufficiency of reason--EVS), either for its existence, or for its non-existence--e.g. if a triangle exist(s), a reason or cause must be granted for its existence; if, on the contrary, it does not exist, a cause must also be granted, which prevents it from existing, or annuls its existence. This reason or cause must either be contained in the nature of the thing in question, or be external to it. For instance, the reason for the non-existence of a square circle is indicated in its nature, namely, because it would involve a contradiction. On the other hand, the existence of substance (which Spinoza equates

[6] Spinoza, The Rationalists (Anchor Books, Garden City, NY, 1974), p. 182.

*This sentence partly shows the foundational error of Spinoza's system. In a nutshell, his error is found by linking together his definition of substance (which says a substance is conceived through itself only (see Ax. II)) with Axiom IV, which says the "knowledge of an effect depends on and involves the

with God) follows also from its nature, inasmuch as its nature involves existence (see Prop. vii). But the reason for the existence of a triangle or a circle does not follow from the nature of those figures, but from the order of universal nature in extension. From the latter it must follow, either that a triangle necessarily exists, or that it is impossible that it should exist.* So much is self-evident. It follows therefrom that a thing necessarily exists, if no cause or reason be granted which prevents its existence. If, then, no cause or reason can be given, which prevents the existence of God, or which destroys his existence, we must certainly conclude that he necessarily does exist. If such a reason or cause should be given, it must either be drawn from the very nature of God, or be external to him--that is, drawn from another substance of another nature. (But, as the reader has already seen, there is only ONE substance for Spinoza. Therefore, God has to exist since one can't take a reason or cause to deny God's existence from God itself--EVS). For if it were (drawn from) of the same nature, God, by that very fact, would be admitted to exist. But substance of another nature could have nothing in common with God (by Prop. ii), and therefore would be unable either to cause or to destroy his existence. As, then, a reason or cause which would annul the divine existence cannot be drawn from anything external to the divine nature, such cause must perforce, if God does not exist, be drawn from God's own nature (a key statement), which would involve a contradiction. To make such an affirmation about a being absolutely infinite and supremely perfect, is absurd; therefore, neither in the nature of God, nor externally to his nature, can a cause or reason be assigned which would annul his existence.

knowledge of the cause." Then, while on his road to pantheism, Spinoza then employs these two ideas to prove there is only one substance by saying if one substance could produce another then one could only know the produced substance through the substance that created it, which is absurd since a substance can only be known itself and not by its cause. (Note Prop. III). Thus the Spiritual Creator (Cause) of a material creation of Genesis 1:1 is denied, and the transcendant God of the Bible is made immanent. Suffice it to say, the epistemological (not metaphysical) issue raised by Spinoza here can be refuted easily. I can know that the grass is green without knowing anything about the cause of its greenness i.e. about chlorophyll, photosynthesis, or light wavelengths.

*Thus nothing is contingent. It either must exist or it must not exist. Spinoza's determinism strikes again!

Therefore, God necessarily exists. Q.E.D. . . . whatsoever perfection is possessed by substance is due to no external cause; wherefore the existence of substance must arise solely from its own nature, which is nothing else but its essence (Spinoza, Ethics, 185-6, 187)."[7]

So what's the point behind making this long quote?

First, notice some of Spinoza's logic carefully, which will help to show main appeal of pantheism: Its simplicity. If God is everything, nothing can be used to deny his existence. Thus, since God is everything, we sense, reason on, or are, we very well can't deny It exists[8] Spinoza doesn't actually put his argument in this form (note what he says when he directs the reader to prop. II), but this logic underlies the main point of what is asserted in proposition XI since it lies in the previous propositions. Though the logic of a denial of Spinoza's argument would be torturous and tangled, if one did deny that what humans normally sense is God, then Spinoza's Ontological proof loses most of the power that makes it better than Descartes' form of it. When Spinoza says above that we must conclude God exists if no reason can be found that prevents Its existence and says the reason for prevention comes from either God Itself or something outside God, whatever is drawn from outside God is something Spinoza already has concluded doesn't exist since God is everything. When Spinoza says "But substance of another nature could have nothing in common with God (by prop. ii)," he is clearly mentioning something hypothetically that has already ruled out since God is the only substance. Thus Spinoza is clearly arguing that since God is all, nothing can be used to deny It exists since one's denial of God must use a fact that is God. This part of Spinoza's ontological argument is an excellent way to prove that a "God" does indeed exist, but a poor way to prove anything exists that an atheist or agnostic need fear, for if God is everything, God is nothing.

[8]Of course, the problem now is if God is everything, He's nothing in particular. If the universe is God, "God" becomes part of the problem since both evil and good exist in IT. No reason exists as to why one should triumph over the other (ala the book of Revelation). But that's another story.

[7]Spinoza, The Rationalists (Anchor Books, Garden City, NY, 1974), p. 185-6, 187.
[9]Ibid., p. 186.

A second point is that Spinoza obviously is more enthusiastic about the ontological argument than Leibnitz was, and, if anything, even more than Descartes was. Descartes use of the ontological argument in the fifth meditation was more of an afterthought since he had already proved God to have existed in the third meditation. By contrast, Spinoza laid the foundation for all that would follow in proving God's existence using the ontological argument.

But now let's backtrack to the origin of the ontological argument, which lies in one archbishop of Canterbury, Saint Anselm (1033-1109). His argument, in the Proslogium, could be put like this:

1. God is a Being "which nothing greater can be thought."
2. A Being who is the Greatest conceivable and possible must include all properties that make Him Great.
3. A Being which exists is greater than the otherwise same Being which doesn't exist.
4. It is self-contradictory to say the Greatest Being conceivable doesn't exist since a Being which exists is greater than a Being which doesn't exist.
5. But since God is the greatest conceivable Being, He must contain all properties that can make Him great, including existence.
6. Therefore, God necessarily[9] exists.

Now it seems that St. Anselm has accomplished what all rationalistic christians strive to do: prove that God exists. But has he?

"The (ontological) argument does not, to a modern mind, seem very convincing, but it is easier to feel convinced that it must be fallacious than to find out precisely where the fallacy lies."[10] Since St. Anselm's 11th century challenge, philosophers and theologians have risen to meet it--with decidedly mixed results. Unfortunately, many of the refutations of St. Anselm's proof can be refuted in turn. And these "refutations" have to be refuted if we are to clear the intellectual air and find out what really has gone wrong here.

The first attempted refutation came in St. Anselm's lifetime and was from a Catholic monk named Guanilo. His counter-argument used a certain

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[9]That is, it would be a logical contradiction to deny God's existence.

[10]Bertrand Russell, A History Of Western Philosophy (Simon & Shuster: New York, 1945)

perfect island. He argued that surely an island which is the greatest conceivable and possible can be thought of. And surely an island that exists is greater than an island that doesn't exist. Therefore, an island which is the greatest conceivable must exist since it is self-contradictory to say the greatest conceivable island lacks an attribute (existence) that would cause it to be less great. But it is absurd to say such an island exists, so St. Anselm's argument is faulty. As Gaunilo remarked: "If a man should try to prove to me by such reasoning that this island truly exists, and that its existence should no longer be doubted, either I should believe that he was jesting, or I know not which I ought to regard as the greater fool: myself, supposing I should allow this proof; or him, if he should suppose that he had established with certainity the existence of this island."[11]

But Gaunilo's counter-argument fails to note a crucial point of St. Anselm's proof: that it applies to the category of greatness (perfection) in general, of all things that could possibly exist, and not the greatness (perfection) of a specific thing. The theistic God is the greatest of all beings that do or can be conceived of as existing, and not just of all conceivable deities. Gaunilo's perfect island is the most perfect thing in it class of all other conceivable islands, but is lower in the overall class of greatness (the scale of being) than, say, angels or people. "(A)n unsurpassable island may be a surpassable thing."[12] And, of course, God is the greatest conceivable Being out of all possible beings in St. Anselm's argument. Since greater things than a perfect island can be conceived, like angels, it need not exist because the greatest conceivable Being is the only Being with ALL possible perfections. And why is it a contradiction to deny the greatest conceivable Being must have existence, but isn't a contradiction to deny any other being exists? A perfect island's perfection doesn't entail its existence because not all perfections need be attributed to it. The contradiction only exists if all perfections must be included--and that's only in the case for the Being who

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11Gaunilo quoted in Joel Feinberg, Reason and Responsibility, fifth edition, (Wadsworth Publishing, Belmont, CA, 1981), p. 18.

12Ibid.

is the greatest conceivable being (who, by definition, must include all properties that are perfections). The only perfections the island can have are those of its category (islands) and not those of the entire category of greatness. For instance, a perfect island could never be given the properties of omniscence and omnipotence. Only God must necessarily (by logic alone) have existence predicated of Him since only He could contain all possible, conceivable perfections. And surely a being with all perfections minus existence is less perfect than a being with all perfections and existence. All other beings need not have all perfections since they are never conceived of as have all possible perfections like God has. Thus, Gaunilo's refutation fails ultimately to refute because of a category mistake.

The fact that the Saint's proof deals with greatness (or perfection) of all conceivable things, and not just the conceivable perfections of a limited sub-class (like islands) refutes another, more ingenious analogy to Anselm's reasoning: "the Throid." The Throid is the most conceivably evil being that could exist. Imagine, if you will, an omnipotent, omniscent, eternal, infinite, immutable Satan. This is the Throid. And since she is more conceivably evil when she exists than when she doesn't exist, it follows of necessity that the Throid must exist. But since the Throid isn't the greatest conceivable Being with all conceivable perfections (since evil is a defect), she need not exist. Only the most perfect, conceivable Being must have all conceivable perfections. If a conceivable being lacks even one conceivable perfection, existence isn't entailed since that conceivable being is no longer the greatest, most perfect conceivable. An imperfect being, no matter how close it comes to perfection, like the Throid does, simply can't necessarily exist since existence must be predicated only of the Being which has all other conceivable, possible perfections. St. Anselm's reasoning only applies to such a being. So, she is out of luck.

Another assault on the Ontological proof can be launched against one of the assumptions St. Anselm took for granted in his reasoning, but Leibnitz

didn't: that God is a possible Being. That is, is one of God's attributes in itself or in combination with another attribute self-contradictory? For if a being with all conceivable possible perfections is self-contradictory, He would not then be truly conceivable. One can't conceive, truly, a round square or a blank page with writing on it. Likewise, is the idea of God self-contradictory when a question like this could be asked: Can an omnipotent Being make something without being the cause of it? Such a question is really a variation of the age old issue of whether God can do a logical contradiction. Can God make a rock so big he can't lift it? Can God make 2 + 2 = 5? Can God destroy Himself and then come back three times more powerful? The correct answer to such nonsense is "no," because it fails to notice the distinction between God's essence and His will.

One ancient issue arises in connection to what God's omnipotence entails. This issue can be put this way: Do God's commands make an act moral, or does God command us to do what is moral already? Another issue is this one: Do God's commands create the law of identity (non-contradiction), which in turn binds Him in not being able to do a logical contradiction, or, does the law of identity have its origin not in God (and is thus beyond His power)? To resolves these two paradoxes and many similar ones, one has to draw the distinction between God's will and God's essence*, if one takes a natural law view of morality and the laws of logic. To put it simply, what God wills is based on what He is. God's law is not arbitrary since it is in God's essence and substance already before He commands us to obey it. And since God's essence and substance are immutable, we need not worry about God's law being something he could arbitrarily change at His whim (will). His law can't be otherwise since He can't be otherwise. Yet, on the other hand, a natural law view doesn't somehow place morality beyond God's control because it is in Him (literally) already. What you are is not beyond one's will or power in the sense that it is in you already, although what you are determines what you can or will

*Of course, to draw a distinction between the two will draw gapes from the orthodox who maintain God's will and his essence are one and the same--but I lay no claim to being orthodox, and so I will let them stare all they care.

do. Since God is perfect morally, His essence and substance don't impose necessity upon His free will. The same goes for the laws of logic. Since God has a certain nature (essence), the laws of logic (to put it crudely) are built into God's essence, since He exists, He cannot not exist. God can't do a contradiction because He isn't a contradiction. That which is contradictory cannot exist. So the laws of logic have their origin in God, like morality does, and so they aren't beyond His control because He is those laws.

So, when one asks the pseudo-question, "Can God destroy Himself into non-existence and then comeback into existence three times more powerful*?," one is really asking, "Will God's will (His ability to destroy and to create) ever assault what He is (His essence and substance)?" Since God is harmony, the obvious answer to this question is "NO!" Likewise, the other pseudo-questions stated two paragraphs above can be resolved similarly. The proposition "2 + 2 = 4" is based on God's essence and substance and thus God's will cannot make "2 + 2 = 5" since God's essence and will can't conflict. And, to resolve that childhood favorite about God making a rock He can't lift, one is saying God's omnipotence (making a huge rock) can oppose His omnipotence (He can't lift it. So let's stopping making absurdo ad reductio arguments concerning God's omnipotence to try to banish Him into non-existence.

Also, such a crude analysis of God's omnipotence misunderstands what "omnipotence" means. "Omnipotence" means the power to apply force in any amount whatsoever, and to be able to create and destroy any contingent substance desired in any form it may take. Thus, sheer force can never change the truth of the proposition "2 + 2 = 4." One theologian put it this way: "Would the power of a ton of dynamite make two plus two equal six? or the power of an atom bomb? or of a hydrogen bomb? When these questions are asked it is readily seen that the truth of the multiplication tables is not in the realm of power. Power has nothing to do with it. When we assert that God is omnipotent, we are talking about power."[14] Furthermore, to ask "What happens when an irresistable force meets an immovable object?" is to ask a question that is self-contradictory.

[13]James Oliver Buswell, Jr. in Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, Handbook Of Today's Religions, Understanding Secular Rel...

(Questions, and not just propositions, can be false (not just meaningless or inappropriate) if they demand an answer that is a contradiction). Likewise, to ask "Can God make a round square?" is to have two concepts contradicting one another in the same sentence since a square can't be round by definition, while something round can't be square by definition either.[14]

A more serious challenge to the idea of God being a possible Being is to say, if God is infinite, is He of a class that has no maximal members? For instance, the set of positive integers has no maximal member in it. If one has the number "n," one can always think of the number "n + 1." Could the concept of God involve properties with no maximal member to them? The answer to this is no, since "omnipotence," "omniscence," and "omnibenevolence" are all categories with maximal members. One can't be more omnipotent than omnipotence, nor more benevolent than omnibenevolence, nor be more eternal than eternity. No "n + 1" type functions can be run on these classes. This issue is especially clear concerning God's eternity, since one can't exist more than forever in the past and forever in the future. Thus, none of God's properties involve an infinite class in which no maximal member exists, which then allows God to be the greatest conceivable Being and have all perfections that are maximal.

Although other objections to the idea of God being possible (i.e. not self-contradictory) no doubt exist, I don't think such lines of inquiry will yield fruitful results in assaulting St. Anselm's argument.

Another possible assault on the ontological argument is to say all propositions are hypothetical about existence. Thus to say, "All Morning Doves are white," is really to say, "If any Morning Doves exist, they are white." The problem with this approach is that in many cases assertions of existence are dogmatic and/or in other ways decidedly non-tentative. For instance, the proposition "The city of Troy of Homer's Iliad was thought to be mythical for centuries, but now modern archeologists say it was the city of Hissarlik in northeast Turkey, which really existed." The word "existed" isn't being used only hypothetically here. Or, suppose a philosophical realist was arguing

[14]This idea came from the same book and page number above, though it was from a quote from a different author.

with a solipsist and said, "That table exists outside your mind." There certainly wouldn't be any tentativeness here! So to try to refute the ontological argument by saying all existence statements, including such an existence statement as "God exists," are hypothetical won't necessarily succeed.[15]

A much more famous proposed refutation of the ontological argument was devised by Immanuel Kant in the Critique of Pure Reason. He argued that "existence is not truly a predicate: "If, then, I take the subject (God) with all its predicates (including that of almightiness), and say, God is, or there is a God, I do not put a new predicate to the concept of God, but I only put the subject by itself, with all its predicates, in relation to my concept, as its object. Both must contain exactly the same kind of thing, and nothing can have been added to the conept, which expresses possibility only, by my thinking its object as simply given and saying it is. And thus the real does not contain more than the possible. (Key statement here--EVS). A hundred real dollars do not contain a penny more than a hundred possible dollars. . . . In my financial position no doubt there exists more by one hundred real dollars, than by their concept only (that is their possibility), because in reality the object is not only contained analytically in my concept but is added to my concept (which is a determination of my state), synthetically; but the conceived hundred dollars are not in the least increased through the existence which is outside my concept. By whatever and by however many predicates I may think a thing (even in completely determining it), nothing is really added to it, if I add that the thing exists."[16] Whether or not Kant has refuted the ontological argument by the specific argument quoted just above (ignoring what else Kant said in criticizing this argument) is a drawn out affair, but ultimately his refutation fails to refute also.

Whether or not Kant's refutation is sound depends on a major assumption of his, namely, the legitmacy of the analytic-synthetic dischtonomy, which Kant clearly employs above. If one maintains that a concept means more than its definition, then the analytic-synthetic distinction blurs and ultimately

[15] See Jerome Shaffer, "Existence, Predication and the Ontological Argument," Mind 71 (1962)

disappears. For instances, if the concept "man" always means not only "a rational animal," but also means humans have two eyes, have knowledge, contain carbon, and can be married, then synthetic statements become analytic. For instance, the synthetic proposition "All men have carbon in their bodies" becomes analytic if I assert the concept "man" means (i.e. is defined to mean) "A carbon-based rational animal." If a concept <u>always</u> means its extension, as well as its intension (which is normally equated with a concept's definition), then a concept will mean anything that is essential to all (or most of--since the world is a messy place, there seems to be exceptions to every rule) the existents subsumed under that concept, and not just the intension (definition--its essence or attributes) alone. Indeed, if definitions are arbitrary*, I can turn any synthetic proposition into an analytic one, or vice versa. If I define bachelor as "an unhappy unmarried man," then the proposition "All bachelors are unhappy" suddenly becomes analytic and no longer synthetic. One can no longer "synthesize" (add to) a concept since it means <u>everything</u> that is true of the existents subsumed under the concept already, both known and unknown.**

The legitimacy of the synthetic-analytic dichtonomy becomes important to our discussing the ontological argument since this distinction is vital to Kant's refutation. He explicitly assumes that a concept doesn't always mean its extension, but rather only its characteristics (intension). For instance, he said just above: "But the conceived hundred dollars are not in the least increased through the existence which is outside my concept." But if I say a concept means more than its definition, and that it means <u>all</u> that is true of its existents (its intension and extension take together), then existence does <u>not</u> lie outside the concept of which it is predicated. And it is clear that people routinely use concepts to mean more than their definition (intension). As Leonard Peikoff put it, it is clear to philosophers that if a woman says "I married a wonderful man," she doesn't mean only "I

*The definition of words (the audio-visual symbols for concepts) is arbitrary, but the definition of concepts isn't arbitrary. But justifying the latter is beyond the scope of this paper.

married a wonderful combination of animality and rationality."[16] And if no statement is really synthetic, Kant's refutation becomes worthless since it is based on a false view of concepts. Thus if one dumps the view concepts mean only their definition and instead adopt the (I admit, decidedly controversial)* doctrine that concepts always[17] means all that is true of the existents subsumed under the concepts, then "existence" suddenly flairs up to the mind as a legitimate predicate, if the concept designates existents and not characteristics of those existents alone. Thus on this view no statement ever truly "synthesizes" anything: in the statement"All men have carbon in their bodies," the predicate "have carbon in their bodies" merely names what is already in the concept's existents, and doesn't add anything not in the subject already. Thus, if this view of propositions is true, Kant's refutation doesn't accomplish anything worthwhile.

Of course, any reader now can see a definite problem the author has: If one holds to the Objectivist (Ayn Rand, Nathaniel Branden, and company) theory of concepts, then it seems the ontological argument is sound. Yet I don't want to have anything to do with this argument for God's existence since I can't see any legitimate way to go from an abstraction in my mind to conclude from it that something corresponding to it actually exists. I don't see how one can legitimately define God into existence. I want to be an empirical theist; not an a priori theist. So how can I fish myself out of this mess that I seem to have gotten myself into?

So how does one refute the ontological argument, if the traditional refutations don't work. What must always be remembered is that definitions do not come out of thin air. All definitions are based on observation, unless we are going to dispose of the tabula rasa assumption concerning man's mind at birth. One can not form the concept "bachelor" totally apriori. (Indeed, I

[16]From Leonard Peikoff's article in Ayn Rand, Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology (New American Library, New York, 1967), p. 141. The author has heavily relied on this book's theory of concepts, especially (for this paper) its assault on the analytic-synthetic dictonomy.

[17]The exception to a concept meaning its existents is when the concept only exists in the world of ideas. "Unicorn" or "hydra" don't include "existence" in their concep

*This paper is no place to engage in a full-fledged defense and explanation of the

would maintain that no concept can be formed without some sort of sense-data for the mind to reason on--but that's another one of my controversial stands)* One has to know by observation that the institution of marriage exists and that men exist before one can define "bachelor" to mean "an unmarried man." This much is extremely obvious, though it seems to be frequently forgotten. But then comes along St. Anselm, who claims the concept of God is such that his existence is necessarily entailed by the concept's definition alone. But where do we get the concept of God from? Does it magically materialize out of thin air? Obviously not. Which place does the concept of God come from--from the world of ideas where we find unicorns, hydras, and James Bond habitating, or does it come from the same place "table" or "electron" come from--by direct or indirect observation? We can't know if a concept in our minds is in the world of ideas only or in the actual world also without sense data. In order to figure out whether the concept of God has real existence in it, we have to go out into the real world to find out if the concept of God has real existence subsumed under it or not, in the same ways we find out whether the concepts "electron," "table," or "unicorn" have it--through observation and reasoning on our sense data. By reasoning alone, we can never know whether something exists without some sort of sense data first. Concepts and their definition don't come out of thin air, but are based on observations of the existents subsumed under them, or else are found to exist as ideas only. Just as we can't know "bachelors" exist unless we know a posteriori the institution of marriage exists and that men exist by observation, likewise, we can't know the concept of God includes real existence outside of the world of ideas except by the use of direct or indirect observation. St. Anselm's attempt to define God into existence--to go from an abstraction to existence--ultimately fails since to find out whether God exists requires observations of His effects on the universe or on us.

But now, urges St. Anselm, this concept is different. The concept of the

*If one pushes this view far enough, there isn't really a concept that is entirely a priori since one can't define anything except with concepts that

Greatest Being conceivable is more perfect with "existence" included than not included, so therefore the Greatest Being must exist. I fully agree that the concept of God is more perfect with "existence" in it than with "existence" without it--but what kind of "existence" are you talking about? St. Anselm's argument misses the distinction between "existence" as an idea, and existence in the real world. Since in the a priori world of Saint Anselm's mind he has only ideas--ideas of omniscence, omnipresence, omnipotence, etc.--he can't very well maintain he has the actual existence of any of these concepts, including the concept "existence," in his mind also. Otherwise, God would exist inside him with all His glory if actual existence was there. Since St. Anselm starts with the world of ideas, he can't get outside of the world of ideas, even though "existence" is one of those ideas floating around in his mind. He simply can't maintain that in his world of ideas God actually exists, since this would confuse the difference between the real world and the world of ideas. You can't have something really exist in your mind--in your world of ideas. The Greatest Being conceivable, as a concept, must include existence, but the "existence" included is the kind that makes no atheist or agnostic quiver in his boots: God must exist in the world of ideas.[18] Thus, St. Anselm's argument fails because it equivocates between the two kinds of "existence."

What always has to be realized is that concepts can both exist in the world of ideas as well as in the real world. But one can't find out if a given concept exists only in people's minds (and in such means of recording the world of ideas like books, cassettes, etc., in which the world of ideas also exists in, since the mind isn't the only place to record an idea) until one observes the real world. "Existence" is a legimate predicate--but only if it is found to be applicable in the real world first, otherwise the concept doesn't subsume "existence" under it.* A concept like "unicorn" automatically lacks real "existence" under it, as well as would any concept that had actually existing members that all ceased to exist, like "Carolina Parakeet" or "Passenger Pigeon." "Dragons don't exist" is not self-contradictory because the concept (universal) "dragon" doesn't contain existence in it. On the other hand, such a statement as "Pandas exist" is

[18] See, on a similar note, "Existence, Predication, and the Ontological Argument," Mind

*A concept means both its existents and all their characteristics, as I stated 1962

a tautology, but then, on my view of concepts above--that nothing can be predicated of a subject which isn't already contained in a subject's concept (i.e. its meaning)--ALL propositions are "tautologies."[19] Since the world of ideas does exist outside as well as inside our own minds (in the form of the memories of other people, the printing in a book, or the blips on a computer screen), it is not meaningless to speak of objects that lack a real existence, like "hydras" or "unicorns" or "James Bond." An empty name, like the proper noun "Athena" or the concept (universal) "unicorn," refers to ideas that exist in other people's minds, in books, in cassettes, in video recordings, etc., which all do exist in places outside our minds, it surely is meaningful to speak of empty names since knowing about these ideas enables us to know what is going on in places outside our mind, even if this outside world of ideas has only a ephemeral existence. To say "Odysseus was always an enemy of Athena" is a false (not meaningless) statement since it deals with the external world of ideas and how these two mythical characters (ideas) are related to each other in other people's minds. A proposition can be true or false even if an idea doesn't represent any actual existent, but only an essence (characteristics) that exists only in the mind's memories, pages of a book, and blips in a computer. Thus while ideas and concepts don't have to represent any actual existent, they aren't automatically meaningless (never true or false) if they don't.

But now does my destructive analysis above accomplish anything positive for theism? Yes, it does. If the idea of necessary existence is a legitimate predicate for God, then the cosmological argument a given a new lease on life against Kant's assault on it in the Critique of Pure Reason. If one can prove the whole universe, both the parts and the whole, is just the contingent and possible, then it is legitimate to say something or Someone else is a necessary Being. Note that once one gets the concept of the Necessary Being one then (in reverse order from the ontological argument, which deduces God's actual existence after discussing the ideas of God's attributes*) sets out to deduce the charact-

[19] Leonard Peikoff discusses in depth how all propositions are "tautologies" in his article in Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology mentioned above.

*Thus the cosmological argument does not depend upon the ontological argument as Kant said it did

istics of God like omnipotence, omniscence, omnipresence, immutability, eternity, etc. by reasoning on a Being with necessary existence. For instance, if a necessary Being created something from nothing (which is the case if matter is the contigent and the possible), then such a Being must be infinite since a rise from a void to matter is an infinite increase. Of course, the theist still has to be able to handle the routine objections about the possibility of an infinite regress, or possible exceptions to the law of causality, since these issues are disputable. The theist would still have to prove the premises of the cosmological argument to be true, but at least Kant's objection would be disposed of. And that suits this believer just fine, for even if we can't know God exists prior to experience, we can still know God exists by His effects on us and the world, as the Apostle Paul said: "Because that which may be known of God is manifest to them; for God has showed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without execuse. (Romans 1:20-21)."

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3. Ayn Rand, Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology (New American Library; New York, 1967).

4. J. Shaffer, "Existence, Predication and the Ontological Argument," Mind 71 (1962); 307-325.

5. Joel Feinberg, Reason and Responsibility, fifth edition (Wadsworth Publishing, Belmont, CA, 1981), p. 12-23.

The first book mentioned above (2.) was particularly valuable for showing that Gaunilo's argument committed what I have chosen to call a category mistake while Jerome Shaffer's article (4.) above was valuable for discussing the world of ideas and how it is in the real world in an ephemeral sense. One, two, and four all agreed the traditional refutation of "Existence is not a predicate" had to be worked on more to make it work or else chose a different way to refute the ontological argument, thinking the traditional way didn't work hardly at all.