Modal Ontological Arguments and the Predicate of Existence

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ABSTRACT

In response to the ontological argument for the existence of God, it is often objected, following Immanuel Kant, that existence is not a predicate. It is not entirely clear, however, in what way this objection has any relevance to some more recent modal versions of the ontological argument. The question that I attempt to answer is whether the modal versions of the ontological argument rely on the predication of existence, and if they do not, if they can be said to avoid Kant's objection.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 1078, Saint Anselm of Canterbury proposed a novel argument for the existence of God. Though it is nearly a thousand years old, it is relatively new for a theistic argument. The cosmological and teleological arguments, relating to the origins and design of the universe, respectively, date back at least as early as Aristotle. Since its inception, Anselm's argument, which would later become known as the ontological argument, has had a unique history. These three of the most common theistic arguments are well known among philosophers, but the ontological argument seems to have sparked a special interest. This is no doubt because the argument is entirely a priori. It is based in reason alone and lacks any empirical premises. To learn how such a task is accomplished, it is best to hear from Anselm himself.

> …if that than which a greater cannot be thought exists only in the understanding, then that which a greater *cannot* be thought is that than which a greater *can* be thought. But that is clearly impossible. Therefore, there is no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality.[1]

The argument is essentially a reductio ad absurdum. Anselm attempts to show that, defining God as a being "than which a greater cannot be thought," it is contradictory to say that he does not exist. If he did not exist, then a being that was otherwise the same but does exist would be greater.

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[1] Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 134.

The typical reaction to the argument was described very well by Alvin Plantinga. He says that it "looks, at first sight, like a verbal sleight of hand or a piece of word magic…the argument has about it an air of egregious unsoundness or perhaps even trumpery and deceit; yet it is profoundly difficult to say exactly where it goes wrong."[2] Despite its bizarre appearance, since its creation, it has been supported and reformulated by many prominent thinkers, among them Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and more recently Kurt Gödel, Charles Hartshorne, Norman Malcolm, and Plantinga.

The first available critiques of the argument come from Anselm's contemporary, Gaunilo.[3] Gaunilo argued that the same argument could be applied to countless things, a "perfect island" in his example. Anselm replied that the perfect island does not "exist in the understanding" as God does. "That than which nothing greater can be conceived" refers only to God. Any qualifier, such as, "*the island* than which none greater can be conceived," would make the argument fail. It should be noted that this argument is a sort of counter reductio ad absurdum. It does not show where the argument fails; it only attempts to show that it must. Gaunilo did, however, pose a critique that would show the flaw in the argument. He rejected the premise that God exists in the understanding. His reasoning is that an infinite God cannot be comprehended. This critique somewhat confuses Anselm's language, as it is not necessary that God be comprehended, merely that the concept of God is understood. Modern language used to describe

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[2] Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, (Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 196.
[3] Michael Peterson et al., *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 135.

Anselm's argument would clarify this point. His first premise could be characterized as, "it is possible that there exists a being than which none greater can be conceived." Gaunilo's objection as stated does not seem to apply to this premise.

At any rate, these objections were not sufficient to defeat the argument, but they characterize much of the debate over it. As Plantinga said, it seems like word magic or verbal sleight of hand. Quite a bit of time would pass, however, before anyone could claim to have learned the trick.

The singular phrase that has most often been used to dismiss any form of ontological argument is, "Existence is not a predicate." It was most likely Pierre Gassendi who first uttered this phrase in relation to the ontological argument,[4] but most people who reiterate it are referencing Immanuel Kant from his *Critique of Pure Reason*. This is perhaps due to some preference for Kant's explanation of the objection, or maybe it is merely because he popularized it. Whatever the reason, the focus for this discussion will be centered on Kant's critique.

Kant has René Descartes' formulation in mind specifically as he poses his objection. Descartes uses the analogy of a triangle to defend his ontological argument. As a triangle has certain necessary characteristics, such as having three sides and interior angles adding up to 180 degrees, so God has the necessary characteristic of existence. He says, "…the mind ought to conclude clearly that a

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[4] J. William Forgie, "How Is the Question 'Is Existence a Predicate?' Relevant to the Ontological Argument?", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, no. 3, (2008), p. 120.

supremely perfect being exists from the fact alone that necessary and eternal existence is included in the idea of a supremely perfect being."[5] Kant replies:

But if I reject the subject as well as the predicate, there is no contradiction, because there is nothing left that could be contradicted. To posit a triangle and yet to reject its three angles is contradictory; but there is no contradiction at all in rejecting the triangle along with its three angles.[6]

In other words, something must exist to bear any predicates at all. It seems very odd that there should be a contradiction in saying that something does not exist due to a characteristic of the subject in question. More of the riddles surrounding existence will be considered later, but for the moment it will suffice to say that these objections have been satisfactory for many.

Since the time of Kant, there have been those who have found the project of the ontological argument compelling. It is quite likely that there are at least some philosophers who espoused Anselm's exact argument, defending it in its original form from its various critiques. I am unaware of anyone specifically who has done this, but they are not the topic of the present paper. I would like rather to consider those who have taken up the goal of the ontological argument, to prove *that* God is from *what* God is, but have used different methods. The modern reformulations of the ontological argument are known collectively as modal

[5] René Descartes and Desmond M. Clarke, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings,* (Penguin Books, 2003), p. 117.
[6] Immanuel Kant, Paul Guyer, and Allen W. Wood, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 501.

ontological arguments. Alvin Plantinga's formulation will be the specific modal version on which I will focus.

It would be somewhat odd for anyone after Kant to propose an ontological argument without considering his objection. One would need either to refute his objection or formulate the argument so that it is immune to it. The modal versions of the argument seek to do the latter. An approximation of a modal version is as follows:

1. A maximally great being exists in some possible world.

2. A being is only maximally great if it possesses maximal greatness in every possible world.

3. A maximally great being exists in the actual world.

On the surface, at least, this argument does not seem to predicate existence of God. There is, then, at least some face-level validity in saying that the objection does not apply. This is certainly what Plantinga thinks, as he writes, "Too often philosophers are content to remark that Kant refuted St. Anselm by showing that 'existence is not a predicate,'" and later in the same chapter, "…the existence of many importantly different versions makes most of the 'refutations' one finds in textbooks look pretty silly."[7]

The question at hand is whether this claim is in fact legitimate. Kant's objection has been seen by many as not merely refuting Anselm's formulation of

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[7] Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 196 and 212.

the argument, but as showing that any attempt at an ontological argument is a mistaken project. Does Kant's objection actually show that "one cannot build bridges from the conceptual realm to the real world"? Are the recent versions of the ontological argument actually different in a way significant enough to be immune to Kant's objection? To answer these questions, it will be necessary to evaluate the veracity of the objection as it is commonly quoted, Kant's real intentions for his objection and its application to earlier ontological arguments, and finally the differences between those arguments and the modal versions.

II. IS EXISTENCE A PREDICATE?

Faced with Kant's objection, the question will naturally arise, if existence is not a predicate, what is it? If the error of the ontological argument is that it predicates existence of God, then this error is not merely of the argument, but our language in general. We must consider what is really meant by a statement like, "Horses exist," if it is not predicating existence of horses. Grammatically, at least, this is exactly what is happening. This has led many to take for granted that existence is a predicate not only grammatically, but also logically. It is no longer *taken for granted* in philosophical circles, but it is still believed by some. That existence is simply a predicate in the same sense as redness is likely universally rejected, but the difficulties of definition lead some to refer to it as a special case of a predicate. The question of whether or not existence is a predicate and what it is if not a predicate are intertwined. Any discussion of the former question will have to consider the latter. One such discussion that is well worth analyzing is

between W. Kneale and G. E. Moore. Kneale and Moore take opposing sides on the problem, and the result is enlightening.

Kneale's first point has already been made, that existence is not a predicate in the logical sense simply because it is so grammatically. The ontological argument, Kneale says, is proof enough that this mistake has been made. He references Descartes' formulation of the argument specifically, in which he compares the existence of God to a triangle's having interior angles equal to two right angles. There are several fairly apparent differences between this predicate of a triangle and the supposed predicate of existence. It is clear that a triangle's having interior angles equal to two right angles is an essential characteristic of a triangle. It is not possible even to conceive of a triangle without this predicate, assuming that it is rectilinear.

Existence could not be a predicate of this kind. Kneale says, "Unless all true existential propositions are analytic, which no one (except perhaps Leibniz) ever maintained…there must be some sense of 'being' which is logically prior to existence and applicable to the possible as well as to the actual."[8] Curiously, this is true in the case of God in the ontological argument as well, as it is first postulated that God is possible or conceivable. In this case, we may say that chimeras have being though they do not have existence. So in the sense in which chimeras have being, they are timeless possible entities. Only with the added predicate of existence would they become temporal. But this, again, will lead to

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[8] William Kneale and G. E. Moore, "Symposium: Is Existence a Predicate?", *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 15, (1936), p. 156.

some odd implications. If we consider that Socrates has both being and existence, in regard to his being, he is timeless, while in regard to his existence, he is temporal. This leads, Kneale says, "to the very strange conclusion that all propositions other than existential propositions must be analytic." In other words, all properties of the being Socrates are timeless, and therefore unchangeable. It would be as much of a contradiction to say that Socrates might not have been snub-nosed as it would be to say that a triangle might not have its aforementioned predicate. If we would like to say that Socrates has essential and accidental characteristics, then this will be problematic.

Kneale concludes his objection to classifying existence as a predicate fairly quickly, spending the rest of his paper on what is perhaps the more difficult side of the question. How should we classify existence if not as a predicate? As Kneale points out, the original objectors to the ontological argument and the predicate of existence were of little help in answering this question. Clearly it must be answered. If an alternative is not presented, then Gassendi's, Kant's, and Kneale's objections will lose a large part of their force. Perhaps the predicate of existence is a strange part of our logic, but we should rather work to resolve those difficulties than to reclassify existence. Though it was some hundred years after Kant, various alternatives were provided around the start of the twentieth century as analytic philosophy became an area of focus. Kneale's attempt to "find a satisfactory place for existential propositions in a revised logic" is heavily influenced by Bertrand Russell. Moore's contentions also have Russell heavily in mind, so it is worth considering Russell's treatment of the question first.

In the *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, Bertrand Russell writes, "I think an almost unbelievable amount of false philosophy has arisen through not realizing what 'existence' means."[9] There is little doubt that he had the ontological argument in mind. This particular lecture deals with mistaken symbolism, that is, confusions about the meaning or reference of words. While Russell deals with many forms of mistaken symbolism, there are at least three errors that are particularly relevant to mistaken notions of existence. These errors pertain to general and existence propositions, modality, and classes.

Beginning with general propositions, the primary error that Russell identifies is that they are often interpreted as implying existence. In ordinary use, this mistake is understandable. In nearly any situation where we commonly use the universal quantifiers "all" or "every," we are subtly implying the existence of the thing that we are talking about. In the statements, "All men are mortal," "All Greeks are men," or "All politicians are liars," the existence of men, Greeks, and politicians is so obvious that we may think that it is asserted in the statement. Because we are commonly referring to things that do exist when we make these statements, we may be tempted to think that the statements would be false if they did not. If faced with the claim that all ghosts are transparent, we may be tempted to deny it based on the non-existence of ghosts. However, this is irrelevant to the truth of the statement. Russell uses the example of chimeras to demonstrate this: "All chimeras are animals, and all chimeras breathe flame, therefore some

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[9] Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, (Open Court, 1940), p. 100.

animals breathe flame."[10] The false conclusion shows that there must be a mistake, but it remains a further question what that mistake is. The issue will arise in any situation in which a general proposition is asserted about a class with no members. In such a case, the affirmative and negative general propositions are both true while their corresponding negations are both false. The question of what is actually the nature of general and existence propositions leads to the discussion of modality.

Russell states, "…what really is asserted in a general proposition, such as 'All Greeks are men' for instance…is the truth of all values of what I call a propositional function."[11] Russell defines a propositional function as an expression containing undetermined constituents, which becomes a proposition once the constituents are determined. Propositional functions are necessary when they are always true, possible when they are sometimes true, and impossible when they are never true. Russell uses the following examples: "If x is a man, x is mortal" is always true, "x is a man" is sometimes true, and "x is a unicorn" is never true. The mistake in assuming that existence is implied in "All Greeks are men" becomes clear. It is more accurately stated, "If x is Greek, then x is a man." This hypothetical remains true regardless of the existence of Greeks, according to the truth schema for "If P, then Q." Consider the statement "All chimeras breathe flame," using the more accurate phrasing, "If x is a chimera, then x breathes flame." This is necessary even though "x is a chimera" is impossible. Existence or

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[10] Ibid, p. 95.
[11] Ibid, p. 96.

non-existence is therefore relevant only to possible and impossible propositional functions. Russell says, "When you take any propositional function and assert of it that it is possible, that it is sometimes true, that gives you the fundamental meaning of 'existence.'"[12]

Russell finds it extremely important to clarify that the modalities of necessary, possible, or impossible apply only to propositional functions, not to propositions. In other words, using Russell's definition of propositional functions and propositions, an expression containing undetermined constituents can be either necessary, possible, or impossible, but becomes either true or false the moment that the constituents are determined. Given the example "x is a man," this is a possible propositional function. If we say "Socrates is a man," this is now a true proposition, whereas "Argos is a man" is a false one. The truth or falsehood of the proposition depends on whether there is a value that satisfies the propositional function. For necessary propositional functions, any value of x will satisfy it. For impossible propositional functions, no value will satisfy it.

An important point which Moore will deal with specifically is the existence of individuals. Russell claims that it is nonsense to say of an individual that it exists. The reason for this becomes clear through the example of a false existence-proposition. He says, "…when you say, 'Unicorns exist', you are not saying anything that would apply to any unicorns there might happen to be, because as a matter of fact there are not any, and therefore if what you say had

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[12] Ibid. p. 98.

any application to the actual individuals, it could not possibly be significant unless it were true."[13] In Russell's definition, existence refers strictly to classes and never to individuals. It is "a predicate of a propositional function, or derivatively of a class." There are many possible fallacies that can occur when one applies a property of a class to the individual. For instance, 'The people in that room are the jury. John is a person in that room. John is the jury.' This is clearly fallacious, but other examples can be more subtle. Substitute existence for "the jury" and the conclusion may be true, but the fallacy remains. Of course, this by itself does not show that existence *cannot* be predicated of individuals, simply that it cannot do so through its application to classes. One reason that Russell gives to say that existence cannot be predicated of individuals is that any statement about an individual would be impossible if it did not exist. He writes:

> There is no sort of point in a predicate which could not conceivably be false…if there were such a thing as this existence of individuals that we talk of, it would be absolutely impossible for it not to apply, and that is the characteristic of a mistake.[14]

"This does not exist" is obviously nonsense. Less obviously, Russell would say, "This exists" is also nonsense. For something to be called true, it must be the kind of thing that could be false. Existence, therefore, applies only to those things that could be non-existent, which is not the case with any individuals of which we could say, "This exists."

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[13] Ibid. p. 99.
[14] Bertrand Russell, in R. C. Marsh (Ed.), *Logic and Knowledge,* p. 241.

Kneale follows Russell in his classification of existence propositions. Both of them claim that a statement like, "Horses exist," is logically stated as, "Something is a horse," or "For some X, X is a horse." One particular issue which Russell does not deal with, however, is what Kneale refers to as "The doctrine of prior possibility," that is, "that there is a sense of 'being' logically prior to existence and applicable to the possible as well as to the actual."[15] Kneale recognizes that in addition to finding a suitable classification of existence propositions, one must also deal with prior possibility if the idea of existence as a predicate is to be rejected. Conceiving of existence as a predicate, it is quite simple to say what separates the possible from the actual. The actual possesses the predicate of existence, while the merely possible does not, or of propositions we could say, the actual possesses factuality while the merely possible does not. Kneale admits that this latter form does not result in the bizarre conclusions of existence as a logical predicate. It allows us say that Socrates may have been snub-nosed, whereas the previous form seemed to lead to the conclusion that all propositions except for existential propositions are analytic.

G. E. Moore remains skeptical of Kneale's claim. The arguments against existence being a predicate, as in Kneale's argument, typically point to the absurdities that arise when we treat existence like other predicates. These arguments, however, may not successfully show that existence is not a predicate

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[15] William Kneale and G. E. Moore, "Symposium: Is Existence a Predicate?", p. 156.

in some sense. Denying that existence is a predicate in any sense may result in the inability to account for certain propositions.

Moore structures his discussion around the comparison of the two propositions, "Tame tigers exist" and "Tame tigers growl." The latter is an example that is quite plainly a predicate, or attribute. By contrasting the logical form of the two sentences we can see the differences that supposedly imply that existence cannot be a predicate.

The first difference to be noted is that the grammatical similarity that exists between the two sentences cannot be maintained if we consider their possible meanings. Moore points out that the sentence "Tame tigers growl" could be used to mean all, most, or some tame tigers growl. The grammatically equivalent sentences with the word "exist" have no clear meaning. What could possibly be meant by saying that all tame tigers exist? At the very least the sentence will strike the reader as very bizarre. Perhaps the even better example is the negation of the phrases "Some tame tigers growl" and "Some tame tigers exist." The first is perfectly clear, but to say that some tame tigers don't exist appears either contradictory or utterly meaningless. In the sentence, "there are some tame tigers which do not exist," perhaps the appearance of contradiction is due to an ambiguity of language. No doubt in practice we often equate the word "are" with the word "exist." If this is done in the above sentence then it is plainly contradictory. Moore suggests that the sentence could be read as, "Some tame tigers are imaginary." The "are" which occurs in the original sentence, then, would have to refer to the kind of "being" which Kneale described.

The second difference between the two sentences pertains to the scope of their content. One could rephrase the sentence "A tame tiger growls," as, "x is a tame tiger and growls." It seems that such a sentence is true, says Moore, if there is something to which you could point and truthfully say, "This is a tame tiger and growls." The thing to which you point is a value of the propositional function "x is a tame tiger and growls." We encounter another difference in the form between the two sentences, however, if we follow the same operation for "A tame tiger exists." The propositional function which we wish to satisfy is not "x is a tame tiger and exists," but simply "x is a tame tiger." If we attempted to state a value of the first sentence by saying, "This is a tame tiger and exists," according to Russell we would not be expressing a proposition, but something completely meaningless. In short, there is clear meaning and content in the sentence "This growls," but none in the sentence "This exists."

Strange though it may be ever to assert, "This exists," Moore considers some reasons why such a claim may actually be necessary. He writes, "…it seems to me that you can clearly say *with truth* of any such object 'This *might* not have existed.'"[16] It seems impossible to explain the truth of that claim without referring to the fact that "This exists." If we say that a certain fact about the world may have been otherwise, then there is clearly a fact about the world to which we are referring. To say that an object with which we are acquainted might not have existed, we are saying that a particular fact about the world may have been different. That fact appears to be that "This exists." Moore suggests

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[16] Ibid. p. 186.

that the meaning of this phrase is best accounted for by conceiving of existence as an attribute.

III. KANT'S INTENTIONS

At this point, it seems possible that if any ontological argument hinges on whether existence is a predicate, then it will be dubious at best. At the same time, while the various riddles surrounding existence remain, the rejection of the argument based on the claim that existence is not a predicate will also be questionable. This is not to say that the findings of the previous section were without benefit. While there seems to be no unanimous agreement on the logical form of existence statements, there is at least some agreement on the issues that arise with particular conceptions. That being the case, it may be possible to claim with reasonable certainty not what the exact logical form of existence statements is, but, at the very least, what it is not. It should be helpful here to analyze a particular paper which represents Kant's objection in its most favorable light. The central claim of the author, J William Forgie, is that Kant's objection has been misunderstood, and the vast majority of people who have reiterated it have meant something entirely different than he did.

It was mentioned previously that the phrase, "Existence is not a predicate" was in fact uttered first by Gassendi, though it is most often attributed to Kant. Forgie claims that the confusion is far deeper than a simple misattribution of a phrase. Gassendi and Kant are not even saying the same thing. Due to certain differences in what they mean by "existence," their objections begin to look significantly different when analyzed. Forgie further

argues that it is Kant's objection and not Gassendi's that is "both true and can be relevantly used in criticizing the (or some) ontological argument."[17]

The relevance of Kant's objection, according to Forgie, is actually its support of another objection, the Caterus objection. It is named for a contemporary of Descartes who objected to his ontological proof. The objection attempts to show that the ontological argument only provides us with a conditional claim. It would only demonstrate that "If anything is God, it exists."[18] If we understand the ontological argument, this objection may seem somewhat strange. Let us rephrase it, first, treating existence like a property. It would then read, "If anything is the thing which necessarily has existence among its properties, it exists." But if something has existence among its properties, then it does exist. If it does not exist, then it does not have existence among its properties. What the objection is attempting is to find a way to deny that a particular concept is instantiated, even if it is said to have existence among its properties.

We will first consider Gassendi's intent in denying that existence is a predicate. His argument is quickly summarized by Forgie as follows:

a) If existence were a property, something lacking existence would be lacking a property;

b) But existence is necessary for anything to have or lack properties;

[17] J William Forgie, "How is the Question, 'Is Existence a Predicate?' Relevant to the Ontological Argument?", p. 117.
[18] Ibid. p. 118.

c) So, something lacking existence cannot lack any properties;

d) Therefore, existence itself is not a property.[19]

This argument does not seem to effectively establish its conclusion. One possible alternative is to say that existence is a universal property, as argued by George Nakhnikian and Wesley Salmon.[20] Existence, in this view, would be a precondition for all other properties. Forgie points out that even if we accept Gassendi's claim, this does nothing to show the error in the ontological argument. In fact, we could now argue that any particular predicate which we claim that God has necessarily is existence-entailing. Clearly, this kind of argument could not work due to the absurd implications, but Gassendi does not help us to understand why.

According to Forgie, the analytic philosophers of the early twentieth century seemed to understand the statement that existence is not a predicate in a way similar to Gassendi. Their intention, however, is to say something about the logical form of existence statements. The general claim is that existence statements are not of the subject-predicate form. This is because subject-predicate statements presuppose existence statements. P. F. Strawson writes:

> An immediate consequence of giving the sense I propose to 'subject-predicate' statement is that the existential statements presupposed by subject-predicate statements will not themselves count as subject-

[19] Ibid. p. 120.
[20] George Nakhnikian and Wesley Salmon, "'Exists' as a Predicate", *The Philosophical Review*, 66, (1957), p. 535

predicate statements… [If they did,] we should be faced with the absurd result that the question of whether it was true or false could arise only if it were true; or, that, if it were false, the question of whether it was true or false did not arise.[21]

Similarly, in *Language, Truth, and Logic*, A. J. Ayer writes:

…when we ascribe an attribute to a thing, we covertly assert that it exists: so that if existence were itself an attribute, it would follow that all positive existential propositions were tautologies and all negative existential propositions self-contradictory; and this is not the case.[22]

Both of these analyses assume that existence is presupposed by attributive propositions. I would suggest that this point is up for debate. If we can talk about the attributes of possible entities, then that claim seems to be false. Even if it is claimed that they do not in fact possess any of the attributes ascribed to them unless they exist, we can still talk about the attributes of a concept. We are brought back to the question of whether these implications mean that existence is not an attribute or that it is a universal attribute.

Gassendi's objection and these claims about logical form will not, according to Forgie, show us that existence is not a predicate. They will not, therefore, provide us with a "cogent criticism of the ontological argument." For this, we must consider Kant's objection. The fundamental difference in their

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[21] P.F. Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory,* (London: Methuen, 1952), p. 182.
[22] A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, (London: V. Gollancz, 1936), p. 42.

arguments, which Forgie believes makes Kant's a cogent criticism and Gassendi's irrelevant, is that "they mean different things by existence."[23] I must admit now that Kant has been mostly misquoted. The exact phrase in his *Critique of Pure Reason* is, "Being is evidently not a real predicate."[24] We may substitute, in this case, the word "existence" for "being." The important distinction is the inclusion of the word "real." This may allow us to say that existence is a predicate in some sense. When we further analyze the arguments that Gassendi and Kant use to arrive at their similar phrases, it appears that their intentions may be quite different.

Forgie finds that Kant's argument found in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is really a condensed version of an argument in a previous essay. He summarizes that argument as follows:

1) It is possible to have a complete concept of a merely possible being, N;

2) Existence cannot be included in a concept of a merely possible being;

3) Therefore, if N were to exist, existence would not be one of its predicates.[25]

This particular language is not found explicitly in Kant, but the terminology of first and second-level properties is very helpful. A first-level property is a property of an object. If I say, "this apple is red," I am assigning a first-level

[23] J William Forgie, "How is the Question, 'Is Existence a Predicate?' Relevant to the Ontological Argument?", p. 126.
[24] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 504.
[25] J William Forgie, "How is the Question, 'Is Existence a Predicate?' Relevant to the Ontological Argument?", p. 126.

predicate to the apple. A second-level property could be either a property of properties or a property of concepts. This is the fundamental difference which Forgie finds between Gassendi and Kant. He says, "The words 'existence is not a property/predicate' have been used to make at least three different negative claims."[26] The first of these claims, which he attributes to Gassendi, is that existence is not a first-level property of objects. The second, found in the examples of Strawson and Ayer, is that the logical form of existence statements is not to assign a first-level predicate to an object. According to Forgie, what Kant is claiming is that a particular second-level property "cannot be included in a concept of a merely possible being." Considering the following passage from Kant, this reading seems quite plausible:

> If I say, 'God is an existing thing,' it appears that I express the relation of a predicate to a subject. But there is an incorrectness in this expression. Expressed exactly, it should say: something existing is God, that is, those predicates that we designate collectively by the expression 'God' belong to an existing thing.[27]

In other words, existence is a second-level predicate, or a predicate of predicates. If this is true, then existence is not possessed by objects. It is in this sense that it is different from a predicate like redness and, as Kant says, "not a real predicate."

It should be clear now how this argument contributes to the Caterus objection. Let us suppose that there is some first-level property of existence and

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[26] Ibid. p. 130.
[27] Ibid. p. 128.

that our concept of God has this property. The Caterus objection, with its clarification from Kant, would say that even if our concept contains the first-level property of existence, we do not know whether the properties themselves have the second-level property of existence. In Forgie's words, "whatever is included in the concept of a thing, even if existence is included, it remains a further question whether that concept is instantiated."[28] It should also be noted that this particular notion of existence appears to settle some of the difficulties encountered by Kneale and Moore. Regarding the doctrine of prior possibility, we can say that there exists a concept which is not instantiated. Moore's claim is that existence should be considered a property in some sense. It seems quite probable that what Kant means by existence accounts for both the differences between the predicate of "growls" and that of "exists" and our ability to say "This exists."

IV. THE MODAL VERSION

I will assume at this point that Kant's objection, as understood by Forgie, is effective in refuting at least some ontological arguments. What must now be considered is what bearing this claim will have on a modal ontological argument. Let us compare Plantinga's modal version with what Forgie calls his "skeletal ontological argument." Forgie's skeletal version is as follows:

1) God has P;

2) Necessarily, anything having P exists;

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[28] Ibid. p. 119.

3) Therefore, God exists.[29]

In contrast, Plantinga argues thusly:

1) There is a possible world in which unsurpassable greatness is exemplified.

2) The proposition *a thing has unsurpassable greatness if and only if it has maximal excellence in every possible world* is necessarily true.

3) The proposition *whatever has maximal excellence is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect* is necessarily true.

4) *Possesses unsurpassable greatness* is instantiated in every world.[30]

The question at hand is whether Kant's objection can show that even for this latter version, "it remains a further question whether that concept is instantiated." If the relevance of Kant's objection to the ontological argument is truly due to its support of the Caterus Objection, then we must ask, what is the conditional claim in this modal version? As he argues that the Caterus Objection applies to any version of the ontological argument, Forgie writes:

> …it will not matter what is substituted for P – 'a supremely perfect being', 'a being than which nothing greater can be conceived', 'a being who has omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness in all possible worlds', or whatever. Nor will it matter whether we replace 'exists' with 'exists in reality', 'necessarily exists', 'exists in all possible worlds', or

[29] Ibid. p. 118
[30] Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 216.

whatever. So long as one can read our conclusion as a conditional statement, it will (epistemically speaking) lack existential import and will be something the atheist could accept. Even if our conclusion read, 'God necessarily exists', or 'God exists in all possible worlds', if it is translatable as a conditional – viz., as 'if anything is God it necessarily exists (or exists in all possible worlds)' – it will still be (epistemically) compatible with the claim that nothing is God.[31]

Let us attempt to reform his "skeletal argument" with these phrases. For premise (1) we could say, "God has *unsurpassable greatness.*" Premise (2) can be read as, "Necessarily, anything having *unsurpassable greatness exists in all possible worlds.*" Finally, for the conclusion we can say "God *exists in all possible worlds*" or a fortiori "God *exists in the actual world.*" Forgie's claim that the Caterus objection applies just as well to this argument is evidently true. Premise (1) becomes "If anything is God it has unsurpassable greatness" and the rest of the argument hinges on that conditional claim. But is this argument fundamentally the same as Plantinga's?

I think that there is one important difference between the two arguments. That difference lies in premise (1) of Plantinga's argument. If the proponent of the Caterus objection holds that "No existing thing is God," then it follows that they deny premise one. If unsurpassable greatness being exemplified in some possible world implies that it is exemplified in every possible world, but it is not

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[31] J William Forgie, "How is the Question, 'Is Existence a Predicate?' Relevant to the Ontological Argument?", p. 119.

exemplified in the actual world, then it follows by modus tollens that it is not exemplified in any world. For this version, it does not seem to be the case, as Forgie claims, that the Caterus Objection, "…does not reject any premise of the argument as false or brand any inference invalid. It treats the argument as sound…But the appearance of success is illusory…we see how and why that conclusion lacks existential import."[32] Surely this is not the case for Plantinga's modal version, as premise (1) must be rejected to deny the conclusion.

The proponent of Plantinga's version could therefore claim that in order to reject the conclusion, one must hold not only that God does not exist, but that it is impossible that He exists. The argument seems to show that God could not be merely possible. He is either necessary or impossible. I think this claim has a certain intuitiveness about it, such that both the atheist and the theist would agree with it. Part of the merit of Plantinga's argument is in providing a justification for that claim.

Now for the titular question, what bearing does Kant's objection have on a modal version of the ontological argument like Plantinga's? It may seem that my conclusion can be predicted at this point. I have already said that it does not have the same implications as it does for a version like Forgie's skeletal ontological argument. In this sense, it does avoid the objection. The way in which it avoids that objection, however, is by the added premise, "God is possible." This premise makes Plantinga's argument fundamentally different

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[32] Ibid. p. 119.

from Anselm's, but it does so in a way which makes its conclusion have less epistemic force.

To understand this difference, consider the following passage from Kant's critique of the ontological argument:

> A concept is always possible if it is not self-contradictory. This is the logical characteristic of possibility…But it may nevertheless be an empty concept, unless the objective reality of the synthesis, by which the concept is generated, has been separately proved. This, however…must always rest on principles of possible experience, and not on the principle of analysis (the principle of contradiction). This is a warning against inferring at once from the (logical) possibility of concepts the (real) possibility of things.[33]

I think that Kant's objection succeeds in showing that "one cannot build bridges from the conceptual realm to the real world." When Anselm says that God "exists in the understanding" this can be read as a claim about conceptual possibility, which Kant would say is a mere lack of contradiction. The central premise of Plantinga's argument does not propose the conceptual possibility of God, but what Kant might call the "real" possibility. As an example, there is no apparent contradiction in talking about fourth and fifth dimensions, but it is questionable whether such a thing is really possible. The criterion of a lack of contradiction is not enough to establish real possibility. The effect of Kant's

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[33] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 503.

objection, then, is to force the ontological arguer to include some premise that cannot be known a priori. The goal of the ontological argument as Anselm saw it, then, fails.

V. CONCLUSION

It should be noted that Plantinga addressed an objection of this sort. Some philosophers accuse the argument of circularity or question-begging. The accusation of circularity certainly seems false. The conclusion of the argument is found nowhere in the argument itself, but is it question-begging? "Although some arguments *are* question-begging," Plantinga says, "it is by no means easy to say what this fault consists in or how it is related to circularity." In order to understand the objection, Plantinga provides the following argument:

1) Either 7+5 = 13 or God exists.

2) 7+5 ≠ 13.

   Therefore

3) God exists.[34]

No one will reasonably accept the first premise unless one already accepts the conclusion. It would be a bit drastic to say that Plantinga's ontological argument is just as question-begging as this, but what similarities might we say exist between the two? In order to say that an argument is not only valid or sound, but effective, it seems that its premises must be in some way more obvious than the conclusion. The accusation of question-begging can and has been sweepingly

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[34] Alvin Plantinga*, The Nature of Necessity*, p. 217.

applied to deductive arguments for the simple fact that the conclusion is "contained in" the premises. It is only a legitimate accusation, however, when the premise is no more apparent than the conclusion. Of course, when this is the case is a further question. For Plantinga's ontological argument, what must be asked is whether it is really any easier to establish premise (1) than it is to establish the conclusion. On the surface, at least, it seems plausible that it should be easier to establish the possibility of God than the actuality of God, but this may not be the case. What differences really exist in the approach to show the former as opposed to the latter? This particular problem is what William Rowe, in examining Samuel Clarke's objection to the ontological argument, classified as an epistemological, rather than logical, problem. He writes:

> It may, *for all we know*, be logically necessary for the concept to be exemplified. Clarke believes that it is logically necessary for the concept of a self-existent being to be exemplified. But he does not think that this belief can be *justified* by merely examining the concept of a self-existent being.[35]

This is perhaps another way of saying that some non-analytic premises must be included in order to establish the intended conclusion.

Yet another condition can be drawn out for an argument to be not only effective, but also convincing. The ontological argument is presumably meant to prove to the atheist that God exists. This is not merely to provide someone with

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[35] William Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 197.

new knowledge, but to change his or her opinion. In order to do this, the

premises of the argument must be held with more certainty by the atheist than his

denial of the conclusion. If this is not the case, then the argument becomes not an

argument for the existence of God, but a reductio argument against the

possibility of God. If the atheist initially accepts the first premise, then, on

realizing the conclusion to which it leads, he will return to that premise and deny

it. There is nothing rationally wrong with this procedure. In this sense, I think

that the ontological argument invariably fails to be convincing.

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