

## Handout 6: Kant's Objection to the Ontological Argument

"*Being* is evidently not a real predicate, that is, a conception of something which is added to the conception of some other thing. It is merely the positing of a thing ... . [I]f I take the subject (God) with all its predicates (omnipotence being one), and say, *God is*, or *There is a God*, I add no new predicate to the conception of God, I merely posit or affirm the existence of the subject with all its predicates — I posit the *object* in relation to my *conception*. The content of both is the same ... . Thus the real contains no more than the possible. A hundred real dollars contain no more than a hundred possible dollars. ... It does not matter which predicates or how many of them we may think a thing possesses, I do not make the least addition to it when we further declare that this thing exists."

— Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1789)

Kant's Dictum: Existence is not a real property.

### 1. What Is It for a Property to Be "Real"?

#### Property Equivalence:

Two properties are *equivalent* just in case it is impossible for an object to have one but not the other.

E.g.: *triangularity* and *trilaterality*  
*being the smallest even number* and *being the smallest prime number*

#### Property Inequivalence:

Two properties are *inequivalent* just in case they are not equivalent (i.e., just in case it is possible for an object to have one but not the other).

E.g.: *triangularity* and *equilaterality*  
*being ripe* and *being red*

#### Property "Reality":

A property is *real* just in case adding it to a list of properties can define a property inequivalent to that defined by the original list.

#### A Test for Property Reality:

A property is real only if it is possible for something not to have it.

## 2. The Objection

### Kant's Argument Against Anselm's Argument

- P1. If Anselm's Ontological Argument is sound, then the Anselmian Solution to the Problem of Negative Existentials is true.  
P2. If the Anselmian Solution to the Problem of Negative Existentials is true, then *existence in reality* is a real property.  
P3. But existence in reality is not a real property.  
C. Therefore, Anselm's Ontological Argument is not sound.

## 3. Kant's Argument for P3

"It does not matter which predicates or how many of them we may think a thing possesses, I do not make the least addition to it when we further declare that this thing exists. Otherwise, it would not be the exact same thing that exists, but something more than we had thought in the idea or concept; and hence, we could not say that the exact object of my thought exists."

— Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1789)

### Kant's Argument for P3 above

- P(i). If existence in reality were a real property, then it could never happen that something we conceive of ends up existing in reality exactly as we conceived it.  
P(ii). But obviously this can happen.  
P3. Therefore, existence in reality is not a real property.

## 4. But then what about the Problem of Negative Existentials?

Kant's Solution to the Problem of Negative Existentials (on one interpretation of Kant):  
Statements of the form 'X does not exist' are true just in case *the property of being X* is not instantiated. (Cf. the Frege-Russell solution.)

### For example:

'Santa does not exist' is true on the Kantian Solution because *the property of being Santa* in fact is not instantiated (it has no instances; nothing has this property).

'Unicorns do not exist' is true on the Kantian Solution because *the property of being a unicorn* is not instantiated.<sup>2</sup>

NOTE: if the Kantian Solution to the Problem of Negative Existentials is true, then the inference from (As) to (C1) in Anselm's Ontological Argument does not go through. The fool can claim that God does not exist without committing himself to the claim that God exists in the understanding. All the fool is saying, on the Kantian Solution, is that the property of being God — i.e., the property of being the greatest conceivable being — is not instantiated.