

## Handout 7: The Ontological Argument

### I. Anselm's Ontological Argument

#### A. Anselm's Definition

God is "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived."

#### B. Anselm's Distinction

Existence in the Understanding vs. Existence in Reality

#### C. The Problem of Negative Existentials

How can negative existentials (i.e., sentences like 'Santa does not exist') be both *meaningful* and *true*? For it would seem that, for a negative existential to be meaningful, every word in it must stand for something; but if the subject of the sentence stands for something, then it stands for something that exists. But then the sentence can't be true.

#### D. An Anselmian Solution to the Problem of Negative Existentials

Statements of the form 'X does not exist' are true iff the subject 'X' refers to something that (i) exists in the understanding, but (ii) does not exist in reality.

#### E. The Argument

1. Assume for *reductio*: God does not exist.
2. Therefore, God exists in the understanding but not in reality.

[from (1) and the Anselmian Solution to the Problem of Negative Existentials]

**3. Therefore, there is something with the following two features:**

- (a) it exists only in the understanding;**
- (b) it is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.**

[from (2) and definition of God]

**4. But nothing can have features (a) and (b) – i.e., nothing that exists only in the understanding can be the greatest conceivable being.**

[Anselm's Thesis about Greatness:

If x and y are exactly alike in all respects except for the fact that x exists only in the understanding and y exists in reality as well as in the understanding, then y is greater than x.]

**5. Therefore, God exists.**

[Since we have reached a contradiction (lines (3) and (4)), we infer, by *reductio ad absurdum*, that our original assumption is false.]

## **II. Objections**

### **A. Gaunilo's Lost Isle**

#### **1. Gaunilo's Definition**

The Lost Isle is an island than which no greater island can be conceived.

#### **2. Gaunilo's Parody Argument**

1. Assume for *reductio*: the Lost Isle does not exist.
2. Therefore, the Lost Isle exists in the understanding but not in reality.
3. Therefore, there is an island with the following two features:
  - (a) it exists only in the understanding;
  - (b) it is an island than which no greater island can be conceived.

4. But nothing can have features (a) and (b) – i.e., no island that exists only in the understanding can be the greatest conceivable island.
5. Therefore, the Lost Isle exists.

### **3. Anselm's Reply**

### **4. Plantinga's Reply**

“Anselm's proper reply, it seems to me, is that it's impossible that there be such an island. The idea of an island than which it's not possible that there be a greater is like the idea of a natural number than which it's not possible that there be a greater, or the idea of a line than which none more crooked is possible. There neither is nor could be a greatest possible natural number ... . And the same goes for islands. No matter how great an island is, no matter how many Nubian maidens and dancing girls adorn it, there could always be a greater – one with twice as many, for example. The qualities that make for greatness in islands – number of palm trees, amount and quality of coconuts, for example – most of these qualities have no intrinsic maximum. That is, there is no degree of productivity or number of palm trees (or of dancing girls) such that it is impossible that an island display more of that quality. So the idea of a greatest possible island is an inconsistent or incoherent idea; it's not possible that there be such a thing. ... so that argument fails” (Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (1974), pp. 90-91).

## **B. Kant's Objection**

“‘Being’ is obviously not a real predicate. ... that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing. ... Otherwise stated, the real contains no more than the merely possible. ... By whatever and however many predicates we may think a thing ... we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that the thing *is*” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1789), A598/B626-A600/B628).

### **1. Kant's Dictum**

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

### **2. What Is It for a Property to Be “Real”?**

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

Two properties are *inequivalent* iff it is possible for an object to have one but not the other.

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.

### 3. The Objection

Kant's Argument Against Anselm's Argument:

1. If Anselm's Ontological Argument is sound, then the Anselmian Solution to the Problem of Negative Existentials is true.
2. If the Anselmian Solution to the Problem of Negative Existentials is true, then *existence in reality* is a real property.
3. But existence in reality is not a real property.
4. Therefore, Anselm's Ontological Argument is not sound.

### 4. Kant's Argument for Premise 3

"By whatever and by however many predicates we may think a thing – even if we completely determine it – we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing *is*. Otherwise, it would not be exactly the same thing that exists, but something more than we had thought in the concept; and we could not, therefore, say that the exact object of my concept exists" (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A600/B628).

Kant's Argument for Premise 3:

1. If existence in reality were a real property, then it could never happen that something we conceive of ends up existing.
2. But obviously this can happen.
3. Therefore, existence in reality is not a real property.

## III. The Modal Ontological Argument