

Philosophy 110W - 3: Introduction to Philosophy, Hamilton College, Fall 2007
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: rmarcus1@hamilton.edu
website: http://thatmarcusfamily.org/philosophy/Intro_F07/Course_Home.htm
Office phone: 859-4056

Lecture Notes, August 30 (Class 2)

I. Inscriptions, terms, ideas, concepts, and objects

On Tuesday, we started Part I of the course, Philosophy of Religion, by looking briefly at Anselm's ontological argument.

In this course, it will be important to be sure to distinguish arguments from their conclusions. Our feelings about the argument should not be swayed by our feelings about its conclusion.

We must also be careful to distinguish inscriptions, terms, ideas, concepts, and objects.

An inscription is a token of a term, or word.

Words may be taken to stand for ideas in our minds.

Different people have their own ideas, but may share concepts.

Some concepts refer to or stand for objects.

So, the inscription 'Guernica' is an instance of the title (a term) of Picasso's painting.

When we see that inscription, we may have an idea of the painting in our minds.

Your idea and mine may match, in which case we are thinking of the same concept.

That concept corresponds, in some way, to the actual painting.

II. Anselm's argument

The ontological argument for God's existence

1. I can think of 'God'.

2. If 'God' were just an idea, or term, then I could conceive of something greater than 'God' (i.e. an existing God).

3. But 'God' is that than which nothing greater can be conceived.

4. So 'God' can not be just an idea.

So, God exists.

III. Descartes's ontological argument

Descartes presents a version of the argument which is simpler than Anselm's.

Anselm argued that the object which corresponds to the concept 'something greater than which can not be thought' must exist.

For, if we thought that the object which corresponded to that concept did not exist, then it would not be the object which corresponded to that concept.

There would be something greater, i.e. the object which does exist.

So, we give the name 'God' to that best possible object.

Descartes's version does not depend on our conception, our ability to conceive.

He merely notes that existence is part of the essence of 'God', pp 65-66.

This is similar to the way that having angles whose measures add up to 180 degrees is part of the essence of a 'triangle'.

Or, as Descartes notes, like a mountain necessarily has a valley.

The essence of an object is all the properties that necessarily belong to that object.

They are the necessary and sufficient conditions for being that object, or one of that type.

Something that has all these properties is one.

Something that lacks any of these properties is not one.

A chair's essence (approximately): furniture for sitting, has a back, furniture, durable material.

Bachelor: unmarried man.

A person: body and mind.

God: three omnis, and existence.

IV. Some problems with the concept of God.

- 1) Evil, which seems to conflict with omni-benevolence.
- 2) Error, which seems to conflict with omnipotence.
- 3) Free will, which seems to conflict with omniscience.

Another problem with omni-benevolence is attributed to Leibniz:

- 1) God is omnipotent so he can create the best possible world.
- 2) God is omni-benevolent, so he wants to create the best possible world.
- 3) The world exists.

So, this is the best of all possible worlds.

A corollary:

If this is the best of all possible worlds, then all of the evil in it is necessary.

While Leibniz argued for his conclusion, it seems pretty obvious that there are better possible worlds.

For instance, consider the world in which you have more money.

Or one in which there is no war.

We discussed various ways around these problems.

We can appeal to a greater good which might be served by the presence of evil.

We can appeal to the benefits of learning, which is not possible without error, or at least ignorance.

But, if we take the concepts of omni-benevolence and omnipotence seriously, we seem unable to rectify them with error and evil, and the other problems.

Or, I am, at least, so unable.

The problems of this section, though, are problems with Descartes's conclusion, not with his argument.

It is important to examine the argument, especially if you have doubts about the conclusion.

V. Objections to the ontological argument: Gaunilo and Caterus

Gaunilo asks us to consider the most perfect island.
Since it is the most perfect island, on Anselm's principles, it seems that it must exist.
But, we know that the most perfect island does not exist.
So, there must be a problem with Anselm's argument.

Against Gaunilo, the perfection of the island may entail that it does not exist, since a non-existing island would be free of imperfections.
Still, the airfare would be pretty steep.

Similarly, Caterus, a Dutch philosopher responding to Descartes, noted that the concept of a necessarily existing lion has existence as part of its essence, but it entails no actual lions.
Caterus is saying that we must distinguish more carefully between concepts and objects.
Even if the concept contains existence, it is still just a concept.

VI. Objections to the ontological argument: Kant

"100 real thalers do not contain the least coin more than a hundred possible thalers" (Kant, 28).

Kant, following Hume, claims that existence is not a property, the way that the perfections are properties.
Existence can not be part of an essence, since it is not a property.

Kant distinguishes between real (or determining) predicates and logical predicates.
A logical predicate is just something that serves as a predicate in grammar.
So, in 'the Statue of Liberty exists', we are predicating (grammatically) existence of the statue.
But, we are not saying anything substantive about the statue.
In 'the Statue of Liberty is over 150 feet tall', we use a real predicate.
Any property can be predicated of any object, grammatically.
So, 'seventeen loves its mother' is a grammatical sentence, even if it is nonsensical.
'Loves one's mother' is a real predicate.
But, Kant's point is that one can not do metaphysics through grammar alone.
Existence is a grammatical predicate, but not a real predicate.

Kant's objection accounts for the objections from Caterus and Gaunilo.
For, Kant would say that in predicating existence of a concept, we are just restating the concept, and not saying anything about the object.

VII. Is existence a predicate?

Part of Kant's support for his assertion that existence is not a predicate is that existence is too thin.

We do not add anything to a concept by claiming that it exists.

Thus, Kant mentions the 100 thalers.

Kant says that the real and possible thalers must have the same number of thalers in order that the concept be the concept of that object.

If there are more thalers in the real thalers, then the concept and the object would not match.

So, we do not add thalers when we mention that the thalers exist.

But, do we add something?

When my daughter and I discuss the existence of the tooth fairy, we are debating something substantive.

If we are going to debate the existence of something, whether it be the tooth fairy or black holes, we seem to consider an object and wonder whether it has the property of existing?

We thus have to consider objects which may or may not exist.

There may be many such objects, e.g. James Brown and Tony Soprano.

Some philosophers, like the 19th-century Austrian philosopher Meinong, attribute subsistence to fictional objects and dead folks.

So, one might say that James Brown has the property of subsisting, without having the property of existing.

That is, Kant's claim that existence is not a real predicate, while influential, may not solve the problem.