Class #2 - The Ontological Argument

I. Why the Ontological Argument

Soon we will start on the language revolution proper.
Today, I want to demonstrate the difference between a linguistic solution to a philosophical problem and a non-linguistic solution.
Our goal in looking at the ontological argument is not so much to look at the argument itself, but to look at the various solutions that have been proposed.
Some responses to the argument are more metaphysical.
Other responses are more linguistic.
My goal is for you to see, with greater clarity, the kind of argument that motivated the linguistic turn in philosophy.
We'll start with Anselm.

II. Anselm's Ontological Argument and Gaunilo's Response

There are various consistent characterizations of the object to which we attempt to refer using the word 'God'.
For example, 'God' is taken to refer to a thing with all perfections, including omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence.
Or, 'God' is characterized as whatever necessarily exists.
Or 'God' refers to the creator and preserver.

Anselm (1033-1109) uses a different characterization: something than which nothing greater can be thought.
All of these characterizations are definitions of a term, a word.
It remains to be seen whether they actually refer to an object.
For example, I can use 'korub' to refer to red swans.
Still, such a characterization leaves open the question whether there are any korubs.
There is no presupposition in this characterization that such a thing exists.

Anselm's ontological argument for God's existence is found in Chapter 2.

> AO   AO1. I can think of 'God'.
>   AO2. If 'God' were just an idea, or term, then I could conceive of something greater than
>   'God' (i.e. an existing God).
>   AO3. But 'God' refers to that than which nothing greater can be conceived.
>   AO4. So 'God' can not refer just to an idea; it must refer to an actual object.
>   AOC. So, God exists.

Furthermore, Anselm continues in Chapter 3, we can not think of God not to exist.
For, it is greater to be a thing that we can not even conceive not to exist than to be something that we can doubt.
In his reply to Gaunilo, Anselm draws further corollaries:

C1. God must be eternal.
C2. God must be necessary.
C3. God must be everywhere.

Gaunilo, responding to Anselm, 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.
So, that island than which no greater can be conceived need not exist.
Gaunilo seems to be missing the strength of Anselm's argument.
Anselm says as much at the end of his reply to Gaunilo.

> You often picture me as offering this argument: Because what is greater than all other things exists in the understanding, it must also exist in reality or else the being which is greater than all others would not be such. Never in my entire treatise do I say this. For there is a big difference between saying "greater than all other things" and "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" (4).

The real point of contention, though, is at the distinction between the two kinds of thought.
Anselm, originally, distinguishes two ways we can think of something: mere thought and understanding.
The fool can merely think that God does not exist, but if s/he understands the term, then s/he sees that God must exist.
Gaunilo attacks AO1, alleging that we do not have a sufficient idea of God.
He presents thought as connected to sensation, as a kind of picture.
But, the issue of whether we have a sufficient idea of God is not central.
That is, to take on the argument on the basis of what we can think doesn't get to the core of it.
Gaunilo's response to AO is neither linguistic nor sufficient.

III. Descartes and Caterus

Unlike Anselm's argument, Descartes's version of the ontological argument does not depend on our conception, our ability to conceive.
He merely notes that existence is part of the essence of 'God'.
God's existence being part of his essence is similar to the way that having angles whose measures add up to 180 degrees is part of the essence of a 'triangle'.
Descartes compares the relation to how 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) is to be furniture for sitting, with a back, made of durable material.
A bachelor is essentially an unmarried man.
A person may be seen as essentially the union of a body and a mind.

God's essence includes omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and existence.
Thus, necessary existence is in the nature of the object, not in the content of our ideas.

> [T]he necessity...lies in the thing itself (Descartes, 5b).

Still, Descartes's version of the argument relies on the fact that existence is necessarily part of the concept of God.
Concepts are objective, but they are still different from objects.
The concept of Picasso's *Guernica*, for example, is not the painting itself.
Picasso could have conceived of the painting without ever having painted it.
Descartes relies on the claim that though most concepts contain possible existence, and so the concept does not determine whether the object to which it refers exists, the concept of God contains necessary existence, and so the object must exist.
Caterus, responding to Descartes, notes 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.

In response, Descartes mainly repeats his original claims.
He adds that we can think of the actually existing lion as not existing, and so split existence from essence.
But, the actually existing lion is not the necessarily existing lion.
Descartes seems to be begging the question.
Caterus's response is conceptual, but not linguistic.
He is raising questions about the nature of concepts and their relations to objects.
We might call his response metaphysical.
While one might think that Caterus's objection is successful, it is not a particularly linguistic solution.

III. Hume and Kant

If you ask philosophers what's wrong with the ontological argument, they will most likely point to Kant.
Kant's response to the ontological argument is both highly regarded and much more linguistic than either Gaunilo's or Caterus's.
Since Kant adapted his answer from Hume, I also wanted you to see what Hume has to say.

The selection from Hume doesn't mention the ontological argument explicitly, but it is clearly present in the background.
He relies on the presumption that all of our knowledge is rooted in perception.
Hume's central claim is that the idea of existence, since it does not come from a distinct impression, adds nothing to the idea of an object.

> Though certain sensations may at one time be united, we quickly find they admit of a separation, and may be presented apart. And thus, though every impression and idea we remember be considered as existent, the idea of existence is not derived from any particular impression.
> The idea of existence, then, is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent. To reflect on any thing simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from

each other. That idea, when conjoined with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it. Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent. Any idea we please to form is the idea of a being; and the idea of a being is any idea we please to form (Hume, 8a).

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.
Whether we think of a thing as existing or not, as necessarily existing or not, we are thinking of the same thing.

A hundred real thalers contains no more than a hundred possible thalers (Kant, 9a).

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.
'Seventeen loves its mother' is a grammatical sentence, even if it is nonsensical.
'Loves one's mother' is a real predicate.
Kant's point is that one can not do metaphysics through grammar alone.
Existence is a grammatical predicate, but not a real predicate.
More importantly, grammatical form is not the same as logical form.

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.

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.
The real and possible thalers must have the same number of thalers in order that the concept attach to the 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 Meinong, attribute subsistence to dead folks and fictional objects.
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.

V. The Fregean (Linguistic) Argument for Kant's Solution

Many philosophers are swayed in Kant's direction by their familiarity with first-order logic's distinction between predication and quantification.
In Fregean logic, properties like being a god, or a person, or being mortal or vain, get translated as predicates.
Existence is taken care of by quantifiers, rather than predicates.
To say that God exists, we say '$(\exists x)Gx$' or '$(\exists x)\ x=g$'
Note that the concept of God, and the object, are represented independently of the claim of existence.
First-order logic is supposed to be our most austere, canonical language.
As Frege says, it puts a microscope to our linguistic usage.
Thus, there does seem to be a real difference between existence and predication, and between the grammar of natural language and the true logical form of our claims.

Still, formal systems can be constructed with all sorts of properties.
We can turn any predicate into a quantifier, or a functor, even turn all of them into functors.
Is first-order logic the best framework for metaphysics?
Is the linguistic solution decisive?

VI. Summary

Gaunilo doesn't get the argument.
Caterus's distinction between concept and object is good, but it is not a linguistic solution.
Hume's language is still on the level of ideas, and not on the level of language.
Kant is talking about ideas, too.
He mentions logic, but for Kant, logic is psychological, governing thought.
Frege turns Kant's solution into a linguistic solution.
Frege makes the logic objective, rather than psychological.