

Class 3 - The Ontological Argument, and Locke and Mill on Language

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 of them are linguistic in nature, and others are not.

My goal is for you to see, with greater clarity, the kind of argument that motivated the Linguistic turn in philosophy.

I. Anselm's ontological argument, and Gaunilo

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 (see §2 of the Anselm selection)

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' refers to that than which nothing greater can be conceived.
4. So 'God' can not refer just to an idea; it must refer to an actual object.
So, God exists.

Furthermore,

1. We can not think of God not to exist.
2. God must be eternal.
3. God must be necessary.
4. God must be everywhere.

Corollaries 2-4 all come out of Anselm's reply to Gaunilo.

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.

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,

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 premise 1, 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.

II. Descartes and Caterus

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

He merely notes that existence is part of the essence of 'God'.

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.

The necessary existence is in the nature of the object, ("the necessity...lies in the thing itself") not in the content of our ideas.

Still, 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.

That is, the concept of Picasso's *Guernica* is still not the painting.

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, 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.

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.

III. Hume and Kant

While Caterus's objection is successful, it is not a particularly linguistic solution.

Further, if you were to poll philosophers, today, they would probably not rank his objection very high.

If you ask philosophers what's wrong with the ontological argument, they will point to Kant.

Since Kant adopted (stole) his answer from Hume, I 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.

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

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.

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 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.

IV. 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.

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?

V. 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.

VI. Locke and Mill (and Wittgenstein and more Frege)

Locke presents words as standing for ideas in our minds.

1. Society depends on our ability to communicate our ideas, so words have to be able to stand for ideas.
2. If 'book' referred both to my idea of a book and something else (e.g. your idea, or the book itself), then it would be ambiguous in a way in which it is not.
3. Also, since my ideas precede my communication, words must refer to my ideas before they could refer to anything else.
4. So, it is impossible for words also to stand for something other than my ideas.
So, words stand for my ideas.

We just suppose them to refer to other people's ideas, or for external objects.

Strictly speaking, it is, "Perverting the use of words, and bring[ing] unavoidable obscurity and confusion into their signification, whenever we make them stand for anything but those ideas we have in our own minds" (§II.5).

Note Mill's agreement with Locke, p 284; he's writing in a pre-Fregean time.

Is §7, on insignificant noise, another supporting argument?

We will skip the material on general terms.

We spoke about it already, in passing, in setting up Berkeley's criticism.

As I mentioned, Frege's revolution against the moderns' theories of ideas and language involved returning to the view that words stand for objects in the world.

The Lockean view led to the nineteenth-century idealism, which I claim is a dead end.

Frege's anti-psychologism led to the early Wittgenstein's picture theory, which was presented in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (handout).

For the early Wittgenstein, language provided a representation of the world, a picture of the facts which make up the world.

Wittgenstein's picture theory was the culmination of the Fregean response to idealism.

The later Wittgenstein (on whom we will spend more time) rejected both the Lockean picture and the idea of language representing facts of the world (handout).

Wittgenstein's later work, *The Philosophical Investigations* starts with a quote from Augustine, describing how he learned to connect language to the world, to hook-on, as it were, labels as names of

objects.

Read §1.

Names do seem to play a special role in language.

Carroll: "Must a name mean something?" (p 1)

In fact, whether names have meaning is one of the most contentious questions in twentieth-century philosophy.

Mill distinguishes between connotative and non-connotative (or merely denotative) names.

Non-connotative names merely pick out an object.

Proper names are non-connotative, according to Mill; 'John' doesn't mean anything.

Connotative names, on the other hand, have meaning, as well as picking out an object.

'The professor of this class' picks me out, but it also means something.

Consider the name 'Dartmouth'.

It seems to mean something about being near the mouth of the Dart river.

But, a city could be named Dartmouth without being near the mouth of the Dart.

So, it is purely non-connotative.

"Proper names are attached to the objects themselves and are not dependent on the continuance of any attribute of the object" (287).

Wittgenstein, §1, says that the Augustinian picture, the early Wittgensteinian picture, describes only one kind of use of language.

But there are others: §3, §23.

Instead of language being a picture of the facts in the world, language is like a game, and there are different kinds of language games that we can play.

Swift describes a nice language game (handout).