The Ontological Argument: A Case Study Plus, Some Locke and Some Mill (I hope)

Philosophy 408: *The Language Revolution*
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Anselm

Characterizing 'God'

- All perfections, including omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence
- Whatever necessarily exists
- Creator and preserver
- Anselm: something than which nothing greater can be thought

A note on characterizing terms

- All of the characterizations of 'God' are definitions of a term, a word.

- It remains to be seen whether they actually refer to an object.

- 'Korub' refers to red swans.

- Are there any korubs?

- Be careful to distinguish terms, ideas, concepts, and objects.

Anselm's argument

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.

Corollaries
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.

Gaunilo

- My idea of the most perfect island does not entail that it exists.

- In fact, it may entail that it does not exist, since a non-existing island would be free of imperfections.

Against 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." (Anselm, 4)

- The perfection of an island may entail that it does not exist.
- A non-existing island would be free of imperfections.
- Gaunilo attacks premise 1, alleging that we do not have a sufficient idea of God.
- But, the question of whether we have a sufficient idea of God is not central to the original argument.

Descartes's ontological argument

Existence is part of the essence of 'God'

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

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

- Bachelor: unmarried man

- A human person: body and mind

- God: three omnis, and existence

- Descartes's version does not depend on our ability to conceive (of that than which no greater can be conceived).

Caterus

▸ 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.

▸ But, the concept of a necessarily existing lion has existence as part of its essence.

▸ That concept entails no actual lions.

▸ We must distinguish more carefully between concepts and objects.

▸ Even if a concept contains existence, it is still just a concept.

Hume

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

- Kant, following Hume, claims that existence is not a property in the way that the perfections are properties.

- Existence can not be part of an essence, since it is not a property.

- "100 real thalers do not contain the least coin more than a hundred possible thalers."
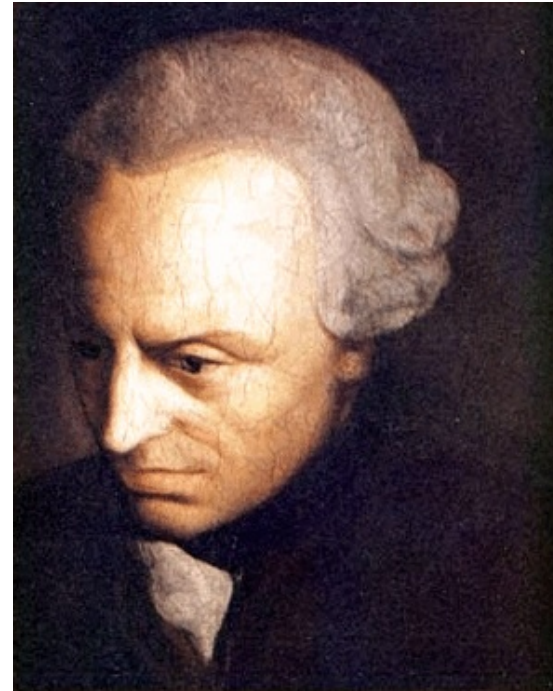
Real (determining) predicates and logical predicates

- A logical predicate serves as a predicate in grammar.

- Any property can be predicated of any object, grammatically.

- The Statue of Liberty exists.

- Seventeen loves its mother.

- A real predicate tells us something substantive about an object.

- The Statue of Liberty is over 150 feet tall.

Existence is a grammatical predicate, but not a real predicate.
Grammatical form is not a sure guide to logical form.

Kant's objection accounts for the objections from Caterus and Gaunilo

- All three urge us to distinguish concepts from objects.

- In predicating existence of a concept, we are just restating the concept.

- We are not saying anything about the object.

Is existence a predicate?

- Kant: existence is too thin to be a real predicate.

- 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 match its object.

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

- But, do we add something?

Debates about existence

- The tooth fairy

- Black holes

- We seem to consider an object and wonder whether it has the property of existing.

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

- E.g. James Brown, Tony Soprano.

Meinongian subsistence

- Meinong attributes subsistence to fictional objects and dead folks.

- James Brown has the property of subsisting, without having the property of existing.

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

The Fregean (linguistic) argument for Kant's solution

- First-order logic makes a distinction between predication and quantification.

- In our most austere language, existence is not a predicate.

- '$(\exists x)Gx$' or '$(\exists x)\ x=g$'

- Note the distinction between the concept (represented by the predicate or object) and existence (represented by the quantifier).

Kant and first-order logic

- First-order logic was developed a full century after Kant's work

- But, it uses the distinction he made between existence and predication.

- The quantifiers deal with existence and quantity

- The predicates deal with real properties, like being a god, or a person, or being mortal or vain.

- First-order logic is supposed to be our most austere, canonical language, the *Begriffsschrift*'s microscope.

- But, is first-order logic really the best framework for metaphysics?

Summary

- Gaunilo doesn't get the argument.

- Caturus'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.

Locke's claim that words stand for ideas in our minds

What is his argument?

Locke's argument that words stand 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.

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).

Frege's revolution, redux

- 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.

Later Wittgenstein

- Rejects both the Lockean picture and the idea of language representing facts of the world.

- *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.
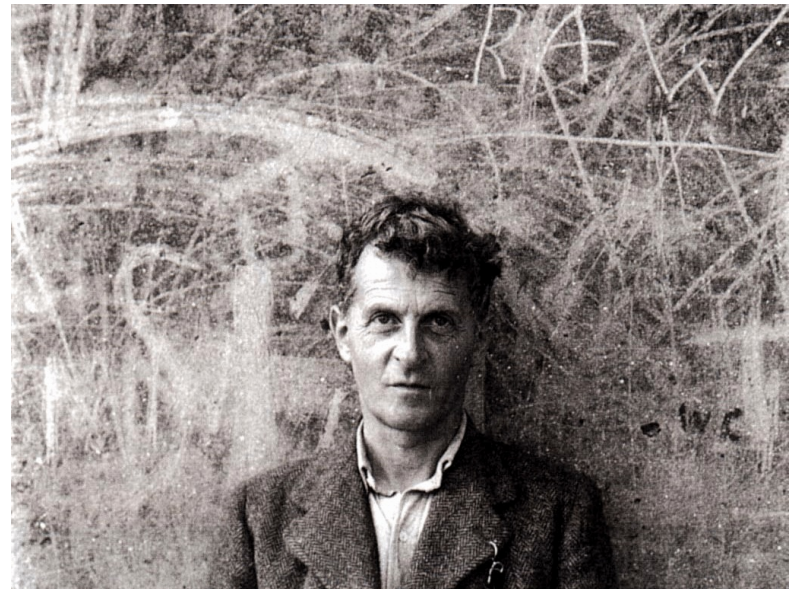
Names

- They seem to play a special role in language.

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

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

- Non-connotative names merely pick out an object (e.g. 'John').

- Connotative names, on the other hand, have meaning, as well as picking out an object ('the professor of this class').

- Dartmouth

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

Language games

- 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).