



KANT ON THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ABSOLUTE DETERMINATION OF GOD



An analysis of Plantinga's response to the ontological argument

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction	3
2. The impossibility of an <i>ontological determination</i>	5
2.1 Logical and real necessity	6
2.2 On existence as a real predicate	8
3. The impossibility of a <i>cosmological determination</i>	12
3.1 The ontological argument in disguise	13
3.2 Dialectical error in the cosmological argument	14
3.3 Dialectical error in both transcendental strategies	15
4. The impossibility of a <i>physico-theological determination</i>	18
4.1 Characteristic moments of the physico-theological argument	20
5. Plantinga's response to the ontological argument	23
5.1 Plantinga on Anselm's original argument	25
5.2 Plantinga's objection: part one	26
5.3 Plantinga's objection: part two	27
5.4 An unsuccessful modal version of Anselm's argument	29
5.5 Plantinga's modal version of Anselm's argument	32
6. The relevance of Plantinga's response	34
6.1 Kant's dictum in relation to Anselm's argument	34
6.2 Kant's dictum in relation to Plantinga's modal argument	35
6.3 Plantinga's modal argument and logical inconsistency	37
7. Conclusion	38
Bibliography	42

1. INTRODUCTION

Kant's critical project that culminated in his *Critique of Pure Reason*—henceforth abbreviated *CPR*—can perhaps best be understood as an honest epistemology in that this critical aspect implies real boundaries to our sphere of knowledge. As such, the introduction of the dichotomy between *phenomenal* and *noumenal* reality has direct implications for the possibility of knowledge. A failure to acknowledge this dichotomy in any ontology that attempts to obtain knowledge inherently involves dialectical error. The possibility of knowledge, then, necessarily involves the faculties of both the understanding and sensibility in relation to what affects the senses—the intuitions.¹

The limitations of possible knowledge that Kant's epistemological framework entails has major implications for the object of theology as well. That is, philosophical attempts to determine an *absolute* existence of God presume to have access to knowledge that Kant's critical philosophy denies.² It is in this regard that Kant criticizes the three only deemed possible species of proofs for the determination of an absolute existence of God—viz., the trichotomy indicated by the ontological, cosmological and physico-theological proofs. The restriction to only three species is in accordance with the aforementioned dichotomy between noumenal and phenomenal reality. That is, whereas the proofs localized within the ontological species attempt to ground its object solely on the understanding, the proofs localized within the two other recognized species do so on the general or specific constitution of phenomenal experience, respectively.

The major aim of this thesis will consist of a systematic reconstruction of Kant's critique in relation to the three species of proofs articulated above. In doing so I will focus primarily on the relevant section in the *CPR* in order to stay true to the original source, and accordingly a close reading of this interesting section will be a logical step.³ Second, I will analyze a contemporary objection to Kant's critique of the ontological proof,

¹ *CPR*, A51/B75.

² The astute reader may rightly question why Kant's pre-critical arguments—e.g., one that is based upon possibility—for an absolute determination of God is not mentioned in this regard. First, the proper object of this thesis is Kant's critical thought, since this arguably reflects a more mature philosophy. Second, formal restrictions as regards the scope of this thesis demand for a specification of the subject. The analysis of Kant's pre-critical arguments—interesting as they undoubtedly are—could easily constitute the object of a whole other thesis.

³ The relevant section here ranging from A592/B620 to A630/B658.

namely that of Alvin Plantinga. As will become clear, Kant thought that the validity of the proofs of the other two species ultimately depend on the ontological one, and accordingly this latter species of proof can be considered paramount insofar it functions as the only possible one.⁴ Although Kant explicitly refers to Descartes' version of the ontological argument, it seems fair to assume this critique extends to Anselm's version as well, since this latter version reflects its archetype.⁵ As such, Plantinga analyzes and reformulates Anselm's version of the ontological argument and attempts to dismiss the relevance of Kant's objection to both the original version and Plantinga's own modal reformulation. Since Kant's critique of speculative theology thus formulated had a major impact on subsequent thought insofar the possibility of such knowledge became questionable, Plantinga's objection to an important part of just this critique can be regarded as interesting and refreshing in its own right.⁶

⁴ CPR, A625/B653.

⁵ CPR, A602/B630.

⁶ Philip Rossi, "Kant's Philosophy of Religion", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2011 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-religion/supplement.html#3.1> (consulted 15 May 2013).

2. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF AN *ONTOLOGICAL DETERMINATION*

In the *Transcendental Dialectic*, Kant departs from a characterization of the concept of an absolutely necessary being as one that here is to be identified with an idea, i.e., a pure concept of reason. As such, its appropriate object—an absolutely necessary being—can never be completely determined, since by definition an idea reflects a concept the object of which cannot completely be given in phenomenal reality.⁷ Rather, the idea here described reflects a mere need of reason, which on its own does not guarantee the objective reality of its object: “From the foregoing one easily sees that the concept of an absolutely necessary being is a pure concept of reason, i.e., a mere idea, the objective reality of which is far from being proved by the fact that reason needs it, since this only points to a certain though unattainable completeness, and properly serves more to set boundaries to the understanding than to extend it to new objects.”^{8,9} Kant then emphasizes the fact that although discourse concerning the concept of an absolutely necessary being has existed for ages, a proper investigation into the content of this concept has never been undertaken.

One outcome of such discourse may have been an identification of an object of absolute necessity with one that exists *unconditionally*, but this perhaps reflects an unthinkable object, since the modality that necessity expresses is one that the understanding can only assess by the consideration of the conditions that determine its reality. Hence, the concept of an unconditionally necessary being seems to reflect an empty or unthinkable content: “For by means of the word unconditional to reject all the conditions that the understanding always needs in order to regard something as necessary, is far from

⁷ More specifically, Kant’s critique of the ontological argument begins in the *Transcendental Dialectic*, Chapter Three, Section Four, A592/B620.

⁸ CPR, A592/B620.

⁹ This natural or inevitable demand of reason, Kant insists, may only properly be satisfied by its *regulative* employment as such, through the use of principles, so as to aid—i.e., provide orientation to—the understanding in its establishment of (scientific) knowledge. Consequently, the pure ideas of reason do not supply the understanding with concepts of objects, but rather attempt to complete the knowledge that the understanding provides. This propensity to subsume (empirical) knowledge under a systematic unity, however, must not be confused so as to reflect a *constitutive* employment, since it does not establish determinate or absolute concepts whatsoever. Accordingly, although the idea of God may be employed as a regulative or heuristic principle, one must refrain from deploying it constitutively so as to establish, for instance, an objective condition for “the possibility and therefore the actuality of all other things” (Prolegomena, p. 83). The aforementioned constitutive use of the idea of God would exemplify an improper or *dialectical* employment of reason, which ought to be avoided in the attempt to determine an objective knowledge.

enough to make intelligible to myself whether through a concept of an unconditionally necessary being I am still thinking something or perhaps nothing at all.”¹⁰ Kant here seems to argue that the necessity of the object in question cannot be asserted *without* any condition that makes the actuality of this modality an evident matter. Next, Kant continues with a critique of antecedent employments of modal necessity in relation to the being in question, and subsequently investigates the tenability of the conception of existence as a predicate. The remainder of this section will explicate Kant’s thoughts on these two matters.

2.1 LOGICAL AND REAL NECESSITY

Although thought prior to Kant’s time was concerned with an absolute determination of God and as such had the pretense of dealing with a determinate concept of it, Kant points to several confusions that demonstrate its apparent falsehood. One such confusion relates to the failure to distinguish between *judgments* and *objects as they exist in themselves*. That is, such thought confused *logical* necessity in relation to judgments and *real* necessity in relation to objects and their existence. To illustrate this, Kant gives the following example: “Every proposition of geometry, e.g., “a triangle has three angles,” is absolutely necessary, and in this way one talked about an object lying entirely outside the sphere of our understanding as if one understood quite well what one meant by this concept.”¹¹ Although it is true that this judgment or proposition as a whole reflects an unconditional or absolute necessity, this is only so because of the conditioned necessity of the predicate in this identical judgment. Consequently, ‘the three angles’ here considered as a predicate *must* indeed be predicated, but only *on the condition* that the subject—viz., the triangle—is given or posited. This logically implies that the existence of the subject itself is by no means absolutely necessary, and a denial of its predicate only entails an internal contradiction if the subject is postulated in the first place. But if the subject is cancelled together with all its predicates, no contradiction can result from it:

¹⁰ CPR, A593/B621.

¹¹ CPR, A593/B621.

“If I cancel the predicate in an identical judgment and keep the subject, then a contradiction arises; hence I say that the former necessarily pertains to the latter. But if I cancel the subject together with the predicate, then no contradiction arises; for there is no longer anything that could be contradicted. To posit a triangle and cancel its three angles is contradictory; but to cancel the triangle together with its three angles is not a contradiction. It is exactly the same with the concept of an absolutely necessary being. If you cancel its existence, then you cancel the thing itself with all its predicates; where then is the contradiction supposed to come from? Outside it there is nothing that would contradict it, for the thing is not supposed to be externally necessary; and nothing internally either, for by cancelling the thing itself, you have at the same time cancelled everything internal. God is omnipotent; that is a necessary judgment. Omnipotence cannot be cancelled if you posit a divinity, i.e., an infinite being, which is identical with that concept. But if you say, **God is not** [sic], then neither omnipotence nor any other of his predicates is given; for they are all cancelled together with the subject, and in this thought not the least contradiction shows itself.”¹²

Hence, when in an *a priori* judgment one conceives of God as being identical with existence considered as an internal, necessary predicate—reflecting an analytical judgment—a contradiction can only result when one asserts the subject and also ‘annihilates’ its identical predicates. But, Kant effectively asks, if proponents in favor of the ontological argument thus articulated were to deny God’s existence in the first place, so would his proclaimed existence, and nothing would remain that could possibly contradict this absolute negation. Whatever transcendental thought may bring to the fore, no *a priori* conceived subject can determine its own actuality on the basis of mere concepts alone, and one “cannot form the least concept of a thing that, if all its predicates were cancelled, would leave behind a contradiction, and without a contradiction, I have through mere pure concepts *a priori* no mark of impossibility.”¹³ Still, one could persist and put forward one conceived exception to Kant’s claim that every *a priori* concept—e.g., including an object and its existence—can be cancelled without possible

¹² CPR, A595/B623.

¹³ CPR, A596/B624.

contradiction, namely, the concept of “the most real being.”¹⁴ This being is then conceived as most real in that it contains all reality, and existence is legitimately considered an element—i.e., internal property—of reality. Although Kant here agrees that such a being reflects a legitimate possibility, this alone does not determine its absolute existence, but rather indicates a mere tautology, since “You have already committed a contradiction when you have brought the concept of its [viz., divine being] existence, under whatever disguised name, into the concept of a thing which you would think merely in terms of its possibility.”¹⁵

This is tautological since any judgment that contains the assertion of a possible subject in conjunction with existence predicated of it *already* presupposes the object’s actuality, and consequently existence as a predicate adds nothing to the concept. This is why Kant categorizes such judgments as analytic rather than synthetic in nature. Furthermore, only in analytic judgments is one allowed to deduce an internal contradiction from the cancellation of existence as a predicate—e.g. by cancelling the three angles of a postulated triangle. Since “every [real] existential proposition is synthetic”, which probably refers to experience as a final criterion, any judgment that effectively denies the existence of its subject cannot as such imply a contradiction, since every synthetic *a posteriori* object is contingent only.¹⁶ The following and last section of Kant’s critique of the ontological argument will focus on Kant’s second major difficulty pertaining to the ontological argument, that is, its assumption of existence as a real predicate.

2.2 ON EXISTENCE AS A REAL PREDICATE

Kant’s dichotomy reflected by the *noumenal* and *phenomenal* realities implies a specific interpretation of existence. To say of an object that it has a *real* existence, in Kantian terminology, seems to imply an actuality of it in phenomenal reality. Accordingly, the concept of the subject in a proposition is not enlarged when it is in fact determined in phenomenal reality, but rather it indicates, *ceterus paribus*, the positing of the object the subject refers to. Thus framed, Kant recognizes an erroneous assumption that allegedly

¹⁴ CPR, A596/B624.

¹⁵ CPR, A597/B625.

¹⁶ CPR, A598/B626.

plagued antecedent proponents of the ontological argument, namely, existence considered as a real predicate. Kant initially admits that anything can function as a logical predicate, since “logic abstracts from every content.”¹⁷ A *real* predicate, however, must be identified with the *determination* of a thing, and as such enlarges the concept of a thing. For instance, although the copula in the proposition ‘Kant *is* gifted’ connects the subject with its predicate, it does not function as a real predicate on its own. Although Kant’s giftedness seems evident—viz., analytic—this proposition reflects a synthetic *a posteriori* proposition. Only by a reference to experience could one assess whether giftedness properly applies to the subject in question, and as such this predicate in fact *does* add to the concept of the subject. When we define *x* as a variable that includes all the proper predicates of the subject in question, and then consider the proposition ‘Kant is *x*’, the copula does not imply another predicate, but “only posits the subject in itself with all its predicates, and indeed posits the object in relation to my concept.”¹⁸ Thus, the concept of the thing—viz., ‘Kant’—is not enlarged by the copula, but merely reflects the positing of its actuality in phenomenal reality.

When one would insist that existence does in fact reflect a real predicate, a logical connection between the concept of a possible object and its actuality seems lost. That is, if existence is in fact considered a real predicate that enlarges the concept of a possible object, the latter in its actuality could not be identical to its mere possibility, since this would imply a mismatch—i.e., misidentification—between a possible concept and its actual referent. Thus, when in an ontological approach one considers the concept of God and all its alleged predicates, and includes existence as a real predicate such as expressed in the proposition ‘God *is*’, this does *not* imply an absolute determination or an enlargement of the concept, but only reflects the mere positing of the subject in question, and construed as such rather seems to indicate a *petitio principii*. Kant illustrates this with comparing the possibility of a hundred dollars (or ‘thalers’) with their actual existence:

“Thus the actual contains nothing more than the merely possible. A hundred actual dollars do not contain the least bit more than a hundred possible ones. For since the latter signifies the concept and the former its object and its positing in

¹⁷ CPR, A598/B626.

¹⁸ CPR, A599/B627.

itself, then, in case the former contained more than the latter, my concept would not express the entire object and thus would not be the suitable concept of it. But in my financial condition there is more with a hundred actual dollars than with the mere concept of them (i.e., their possibility). For with actuality the object is not merely included in my concept analytically, but adds synthetically to my concept (which is a determination of my state); yet the hundred dollars themselves that I am thinking of are not in the least increased through this being outside my concept.”¹⁹

Kant then proceeds and attributes the major cause of the difficulty of existence in relation to the object here considered to its conceived nature. That is, the concept of God does not reflect a possible object of experience, and as such there exists no touchstone to which one can refer in order to assess whether the object in question has an existence in an external reality. For human beings existence necessarily is tied to reality, and the latter reflects the sum-total of experience, which is necessarily subjective due to the nature of our minds.²⁰ God as an object of pure thought—viz., *in intellectus*—then, can at best reflect a possibility, and consequently an absolute determination—viz., *in re*—cannot be deduced from it:

“Thus whatever and however much our concept of an object may contain, we have to go out beyond it in order to provide it with existence. With objects of sense this happens through the connection with some perception of mine in accordance with empirical laws; but for objects of pure thinking there is no means whatever for cognizing their existence, because it would have to be cognized entirely *a priori*, but our consciousness of all existence (whether immediately through perception or through inferences connecting something with perception) belongs entirely and without exception to the unity of experience, and though an existence outside this field cannot be declared

¹⁹ CPR, A599/B627.

²⁰ Andrew Brook, “Kant’s View of the Mind and Consciousness of Self”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2013 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/kant-mind> (consulted 15 May 2013).

absolutely impossible, it is a presupposition that we cannot justify through anything.”²¹

Although the concept of being here discussed cannot as such have a phenomenological correlate—viz., an actualization of the subject in phenomenal reality—Kant recognizes a strategy that *prima facie* can be considered the ontological one’s converse, that is, the cosmological approach claims to be able to deduce an absolute determination of God’s existence on the basis of an empirical rather than an ontological deduction. Kant’s critique pertaining to the recognized erroneous assumptions of this claim will form the basis of the following section.

²¹ CPR, A601/B629.

3. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF A COSMOLOGICAL DETERMINATION

As illustrated above, one of the difficulties Kant attributed to the ontological attempt to determine an absolute existence of God is its erroneous assumption that existence is a real predicate. Since God here is postulated as an entity that reflects the highest reality—viz., the *ens realissimum*—existence was perceived as a necessary predicate within the idea of a most real being. Although Kant states that the cosmological argument retains this characterization of God, the latter here is not employed as a primary point of departure. Thus, existence as a necessary consequence of a perceived idea of God is to be categorized as ontological but not cosmological, since in Kantian terms an idea is a product of reason instead of experience.

Accordingly, the cosmological argument *prima facie* proceeds from what is given in experience in general, and attempts to ground an absolute and necessary determination of God on the basis of it. This species of argument properly is dubbed ‘cosmological’, since the object of all possible experience is identified with the world, and the latter seems to function as the argument’s starting point. The world as such reflects a contingent whole, so the cosmological deduction can be recognized as one that infers from this contingency to an alleged necessity, the latter modality satisfied by God as its most reasonable candidate. This necessity can then perhaps be considered a *sufficient reason* for the existence of contingent reality in the first place.²² Kant here refers to Leibniz, whose proof is characterized by its departure from the contingency of the world—i.e., Leibniz’s *contingentia mundi*—which seems to reflect the core of the cosmological argument as well: “It goes as follows: if something exists, then an absolutely necessary being also has to exist. Now I myself, at least, exist; therefore, an absolutely necessary being exists. The minor premise contains an experience, the major premise an inference from an experience in general to the existence of something necessary, thus the proof really starts from experience, so it is not carried out entirely *a priori* or ontologically; and because the object of all possible experience is called “world”, it is therefore termed the cosmological proof.”²³

²² Yitzhak Melamed and Lin Martin, “Principle of Sufficient Reason”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2011 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sufficient-reason/#Lei> (consulted 15 May 2013).

²³ CPR, A605/B633.

3.1 THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT IN DISGUISE

However much the cosmological argument may appeal to the world as its point of departure, Kant insists that in fact it must be regarded as an ontological argument in disguise.²⁴ That is, both the ontological and cosmological arguments attempt to determine an absolutely necessary being, and the excursion of the latter argument to experience in general rather seems like a superfluous step. Since, as we have seen, no empirical deduction can grant the conditions for the possibility of an *absolutely necessary*—viz., unconditioned—being, “reason says farewell to it entirely and turns its inquiry back to mere concepts: namely, to what kinds of properties in general an absolutely necessary being would have to have, i.e., which among all possible things contains within itself the required conditions (requisita) for an absolute necessity.”²⁵ Reason then assumes that only the concept of the *most real* being would properly satisfy the required conditions for the concept of an *absolute necessary* being, and as such attempts to deduce the existence of this latter entity from it as well. It is exactly this assumption, however, that served as the main assertion of the ontological argument, and reveals the identical nature of both this and the cosmological argument:

“Now reason believes it meets with these requisites solely and uniquely in the concept of a most real being, and so it infers: that is the absolutely necessary being. But it is clear that here one presupposes that the concept of a being of the highest reality completely suffices for the concept of an absolute necessity in existence, i.e., that from the former the latter may be inferred—a proposition the ontological proof asserted, which one thus assumes in the cosmological proof and takes as one’s ground, although one had wanted to avoid it.”²⁶

Kant elucidates the aforementioned identical nature of both arguments by a consideration of the proposition “Every absolutely necessary being is at the same time the most real being.”²⁷ Kant contends it is this proposition that the cosmological argument properly ought to prove. When one considers its converse, however, the actual dependency on the ontological argument is revealed. That is, for the

²⁴ CPR, A606/B634.

²⁵ CPR, A607/B635.

²⁶ CPR, A607/B635.

²⁷ CPR, A608/B636.

determination of the proposition “Every most real being is a necessary being” one must rely on *a priori* concepts, and as such the concept of the most real being must also imply its necessary existence, which the ontological argument assumed but failed to establish.²⁸ Apart from being the ontological argument in disguise, Kant recognizes in the cosmological argument thus formulated several “dialectical presumptions,” an analysis of which will commence now.²⁹

3.2 DIALECTICAL ERROR IN THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The first dialectical error that reason commits in this regard is an improper employment of a principle that should rightly apply to the world of sense only, i.e., the transcendental principle allowing one to *infer* from what is contingent to its cause. Since the cosmological argument is characterized by its attempt to determine an alleged cause that exists *outside* of the object of phenomenal reality—i.e., the world of sense—it seems to fall prey to this error. Second, in its desire to achieve a totality or completeness, reason infers from the impossibility of an infinite series of causes in phenomenal reality the necessity of a first cause. This impossibility alone, however, can never justify the necessity of a primal cause, since this would imply a dialectical employment of a principle of reason in relation to phenomenal reality. In its yearning for the unconditioned, reason attempts to satisfy the series of causes by doing “away with every condition”, only to be left with the hope of having achieved the concept of a necessary first cause.³⁰ This hope is in vain, however, since in order for the concept of necessity to have any meaning, one must investigate the conditions that determine its actuality—e.g., only *on the condition* that the triangle exists, do its three angles exist *necessarily*. Third, adherents of this species of argument tend to confuse the logical possibility of a concept of the totality of reality with a transcendental one, where the latter demands a complete justification which no principle of reason can grant, since such a principle can never find this justification within the sphere of phenomenal reality to which we are necessarily bound.

²⁸ CPR, A609/B637.

²⁹ CPR, A609/B637.

³⁰ CPR, A610/B638.

3.3 DIALECTICAL ERROR IN BOTH TRANSCENDENTAL STRATEGIES

Since the cosmological argument is revealed as a mere disguise of the ontological variant, both species of argument indicate transcendental—i.e., *a priori*—strategies in order to determine the existence of a necessary being as a final explanation for the sum-total of experience. The execution of these strategies, as illustrated above, seems not without dialectical implications. The necessary being as identified with the highest reality properly reflects a mere idea of reason, and an absolute hypostatization—i.e., actualization—of it cannot be determined; be it on the basis of this idea alone—such as reflected by the ontological approach—or on its initial relation to phenomenal reality, indicative of the cosmological approach. In investigating the root cause of the dialectical error that apparently inheres in these transcendental approaches, Kant initially observes the following, seemingly contradictory juxtaposition of lines of reasoning:

“There is something exceedingly remarkable in the fact that when one presupposes something as existing, one can find no way around the conclusion that something exists necessarily. It is on this entirely natural (though not for this reason secure) inference that the cosmological argument rested. On the contrary, if I assume the concept of anything I like [e.g., the ontological concept of God], then I find that its existence can never be represented by me as absolutely necessary, and that whatever may exist, nothing hinders me from thinking its non-being; hence although for the existing in general I must assume something necessary, I cannot think any single thing itself as necessary in itself.”³¹

From this Kant concludes that one is both compelled—in order to establish the completion or “systematic unity” that reason desires—to posit a necessary existence as a final condition to the *given* sum-total of experience, but at the same time is unwarranted to postulate a necessary existing object on its own grounds, since any posited possible object of phenomenal reality reflects mere contingency.³² This juxtaposition of necessity and contingency, then, necessarily reveals a contradiction of principles of reason *only in relation to* our representations or appearances of things, since no *objective* contradiction can pertain to objects of noumenal reality. Hence, both these principles—i.e., necessity

³¹ CPR, A615/B643.

³² CPR, A616/B644.

and contingency—properly reflect a *subjective* and *regulative* nature.³³ Since no object of phenomenal reality can be attributed an absolute and necessary existence, the regulative idea of a being in fact conceived as such must situate its corresponding entity *outside* the sum-total of phenomenal reality, since only then is it exempt from the empirical laws that govern the world of sense:

“From this, however, it follows that you would have to assume the absolutely necessary being as **outside the world**, because it is supposed to serve only as a principle of the greatest possible unity of appearances, as their supreme ground; and you can never reach it **within the world**, because the second rule [i.e., that which forbids the postulation of any singular thing as having an absolutely necessary existence] bids you at every time to regard all empirical causes of unity as derivative [viz., contingent].”³⁴

Thus conceived, necessity reflects a regulative principle employed by reason so as to make sense of “everything given as existing” in that it assumes a complete and *a priori* explanation for its existence. Contingency, on the other hand, reflects a regulative principle that compels us to regard all that is empirically given as conditioned or derivative, including any such given object considered as a cause for the totality of phenomenal reality.³⁵

Next to the regulative principles that necessity and contingency reflect, Kant understands the ideal of the highest being as a regulative or formal principle of reason as well, since the thought of such a being merely suffices to satisfy reason’s desire to determine a unified and necessary cause for the manifold in the world of sense, but does not as such assert the necessary existence of such a being in itself. The aforementioned desire is conceived as unavoidable, since the systematic unity of phenomenal reality cannot suffice so as to satisfy the demand of the principle of the empirical use of reason *unless* it postulates the being here considered—viz., that of a highest, most real and necessary being as the supreme cause of this reality. Consequently, reason’s dialectical employment here implies both an unwarranted substitution of this merely regulative

³³ Michelle Grier, “Kant’s Critique of Metaphysics”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2012 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-metaphysics> (consulted 15 May 2013).

³⁴ CPR, A617/B645.

³⁵ CPR, A616/B644.

principle for a constitutive one, together with a hypostatization of a being that properly has an existence in thought only:

“[...] So it also comes about entirely naturally that since the systematic unity of nature cannot be set up as a principle of the empirical use of reason except on the basis of the idea of a most real being as the supreme cause, this idea is thereby represented as an actual object, and this object again, because it is the supreme condition, is represented as necessary, so that a **regulative** principle is transformed into a **constitutive** one; this substitution reveals itself by the fact that if I now consider this supreme being, which was absolutely (unconditionally) necessary respective to the [phenomenal] world, as a thing for itself, no concept is susceptible of this necessity; and thus it must have been encountered in my reason only as a formal condition of thought, and not as a material and hypostatic condition of existence.”³⁶

Having come this far, both transcendental defendants—viz., the ontological and cosmological candidates—ultimately seem unable to escape the verdict that is the sentencing on the grounds of a misrecognition of an actual dialectical employment of reason. Consequently, both transcendental strategies are deemed incapable to determine an absolute—i.e., constitutive—and actual existence of the object in question. This leaves Kant to the consideration of the last possible defendant recognized as such, namely the physico-theological candidate. Exactly why this last defendant will be found guilty by means of the same verdict will be analyzed in what constitutes the remainder of Kant's critique pertaining to the possibility of an absolute determination of God, and accordingly this will be covered in the last section of Kant's critique here discussed.

³⁶ CPR, A619/B647.

4. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF A *PHYSICO-THEOLOGICAL DETERMINATION*

As illustrated before, the ontological approach failed in its attempt to determine the existence of a highest being because of its erroneous employment of an *a priori* concept of it. The cosmological approach not only revealed itself as the ontological one in disguise, but also failed to determine the being in question on the basis of *existence in general*. This leaves Kant to consider a last possible candidate, namely one that attempts to ground such a being on the basis of the specific order and interrelations of contingent facts reflective of the world as we know it:

“If, then, neither the concept of things in general nor the experience of any existence in general can achieve what: is required, then one means is still left: to see whether a determinate experience, that of the things in the present world, their constitution and order, yields a ground of proof that could help us to acquire a certain conviction of the existence of a highest being. Such a proof we would call the physico-theological proof. If this too should be impossible, then no satisfactory proof from speculative reason for the existence of a being that corresponds to our transcendental ideas is possible at all.”³⁷

The physico-theological approach can perhaps be understood as the archetypical form that lies behind more contemporary types of arguments of *intelligent design*. Kant does not hesitate to reveal a preliminary skeptical reservation, however, since the “necessary all-sufficient original being” properly reflects a transcendental idea, and no experience can suffice to completely correspond to it.³⁸ Ideas by definition transcend the limitations of experience, including the idea of the being here under consideration. Hence, no content of experience can adequately fill the concept of a being thought of as “so sublimely high above anything empirical,” and neither can any object of experience grant us a justification for the positing of its existence as unconditioned.³⁹ Since, as was illustrated before, every possible object of phenomenal reality necessary is both contingent and conditioned, the understanding of the being in question as an object

³⁷ CPR, A620/B468.

³⁸ CPR, A621/B649.

³⁹ CPR, A621/B649.

therein necessarily implies its derivative or conditioned nature. If, on the contrary, the being in question is conceived as existing separately from the series of objects within phenomenal reality, its connection to this reality would demand an explanation that reason is unable to provide.

Since the sum-total of the world of sense reflects a unity with its objects reflecting “manifoldness, order, purposiveness, and beauty,” Kant considers this type of argument worthy of respect and deems it an understandable or rational inference.⁴⁰ The series of cause and effect, ends and means, and uniformity in objects coming into existence and their perishing not only instigates in us an understandable degree of astonishment, but also compels us to assume an external highest cause as an explanatory ground:

“Because nothing has entered by itself into the state in which it finds itself, this state always refers further to another thing as its cause, which makes necessary just the same further inquiry, so that in such a way the entire whole [phenomenal reality and the lawlike behavior of its objects] would have to sink into the abyss of nothingness if one did not assume something subsisting for itself originally and independently outside this infinite contingency, which supports it and at the same time, as the cause of its existence, secures its continuation.”⁴¹

Together with the inference of such a subsisting entity on the basis of causality, the degrees of perfection we recognize in relation to phenomenal reality demand a placement of a transcending perfection into this entity as well. This unconditionally and perfectly existing entity, then, serves as a guiding factor insofar it gives our aforementioned astonishment a seemingly proper ground. However, the respect and rationality that Kant associates with this inference from the recognized qualities—or “the wonders of nature and the majesty of the world’s architecture”—in phenomenal reality, cannot as such justify special pleading.⁴² That is, however much the positing of the being in question seems rational in light of the inference here deduced, it in no way alleviates the demand for a transcendental justification insofar a claim to apodictic existence is made. From this Kant concludes that even the physico-theological approach on its own cannot determine the actual existence of its object—viz., God—but

⁴⁰ CPR, A622/B650.

⁴¹ CPR, A622/B650.

⁴² CPR, A624/B652.

necessarily hinges on strategies that deal with the transcendental difficulties that necessarily accompany such an aim. Accordingly, Kant insists:

“that the physico-theological proof can never establish the existence of a highest being alone, but must always leave it up to the ontological proof (to which it serves only as an introduction) in order to make good this lack; thus the latter still contains **the only possible argument** (insofar as there is a merely speculative proof at all), which no human reason can bypass.”⁴³

As such, the physico-theological approach does not indicate a transcendental one, but it nevertheless is dependent on it. Since the cosmological argument is to be considered as the ontological one in disguise, the possibility of an absolute determination of the existence of God depends on the success or failure of the ontological argument—which turned out to be a failure.

4.1 CHARACTERISTIC MOMENTS OF THE PHYSICO-THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Kant recognizes several moments as characteristic of the argument here discussed. First, adherents of this argument recognize a plurality of signs of purposive order in the world, as regards both content and scope, which is indicative of intelligent design. Second, this purposive order is thought of as applying to objects of phenomenal reality only contingently, suggesting an ordering so as to make possible their coexistence in relation to final aims (implicated by purposive order), and as such implying “a principle of rational order grounded on ideas.”⁴⁴ Third, these two inferences imply the existence of an omniscient being that operates through freedom and is the proper cause of the world. Fourth, this being reflects a causal unity in accordance with a recognized unity of the interrelation of all the parts that constitute phenomenal reality, the latter which Kant identifies as “members of an artful structure.”⁴⁵

While zooming in on this latter moment, Kant insists that the physico-theological argument cannot as such determine the existence of the sublime being that it pretends

⁴³ CPR, A625/B653.

⁴⁴ CPR, A625/B653.

⁴⁵ CPR, A626/B654.

to do. That is, “the proof could at most establish a highest **architect of the world**, who would always be limited by the suitability of the material on which he works, but not a **creator of the world**, to whose idea everything is subject, which is far from sufficient for the great aim that one has in view, namely that of proving an all-sufficient original being.”⁴⁶ In accordance with the introduced dichotomy between noumenal and phenomenal reality, which indicates a distinction between ignorance and knowledge, any analogy between the causal nature of natural products and artificial products should be considered premature in that we cannot pretend to be fully acquainted with the products of nature. Although artificial products are grounded upon *our* understanding and will as to their proper cause, we cannot as such extend this ground to products of nature so as to function as a legitimate explanation.

The physico-theological argument, then, cannot as such establish the necessity of the interrelation of all the parts that constitute the unity of natural products, but merely their contingency. Considering the being in question, however, it is just this necessity that must be its proper—albeit unbridgeable—aim. That is, only when it can be proved that the interrelation—viz., order—of objects considered *in themselves* cannot exist *except* when in their substance they are the product of “a highest wisdom,” can the latter be inferred.⁴⁷ Such a proof, however, would demand a reference to transcendental procedures, the employment of which the physico-theological was intended to avoid. Furthermore, the concept of the being in question can only have a significant—i.e., determinate—content when it is conceived as an entity that reflects “the whole of possible perfection”, and as such is identified with the totality—viz., the All or *omnitude*—of reality.⁴⁸

However, given Kant’s insistence on the sphere of our knowledge as both limited and subjective, any estimation of perfection is only relative, and as such we cannot presume “to have insight into the relation of the magnitude of the world as he has observed it (in its scope as well as its content) to omnipotence, or the world-order to highest wisdom, or the unity of the world to the absolute unity of its author, etc.”⁴⁹ Since the world-order

⁴⁶ CPR, A627/B655.

⁴⁷ CPR, A627/B655.

⁴⁸ CPR, A628/B656.

⁴⁹ CPR, A628/B656.

such as perceived in phenomenal reality cannot grant an objective insight into the perfection that constitutes the proper concept of the being in question, the above-mentioned recourse to transcendental procedures is regarded as the only alternative. Since these procedures occupy a proper place within the domain of possible ontological attempts only—and turned out to be defective—Kant insists that no absolute determination of the existence of God is possible: “Accordingly, the physico-theological proof of the existence of a single original being as the highest being is grounded on the cosmological, and the latter on the ontological; and since besides these three paths no more are open to speculative reason, the ontological proof from pure concepts of reason is the only possible one – if one proof of a proposition elevated so sublimely above all empirical use of the understanding is possible at all.”⁵⁰

Kant’s critique as is discussed here has given rise to many responses. Although his critique of the ontological argument often is considered to be destructive, some philosophers have devised attempts to circumvent its implications or dismiss its relevance. One contemporary response has been formulated by Alvin Plantinga. His critique of Kant’s objection may be considered an interesting perspective in its own right. Accordingly, the analysis of Plantinga’s perspective on this matter will constitute the remainder of this thesis.

⁵⁰ CPR, A630/B658.

5. PLANTINGA'S RESPONSE TO THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Although Plantinga does mention Kant in relation to the ontological argument in other, more technical and extensive works, the core of the findings therein articulated can be found in Plantinga's *God, Freedom and Evil*.⁵¹ As such, this work seems appropriate for the task at hand, namely, to offer an analysis of both Plantinga's response to Kant's critique of the ontological proof—as reflected by Anselm's original formulation—and his own modal reformulation of the argument. Prior to dealing with Kant's objection to the ontological argument, Plantinga begins with an explication of the argument as is formulated by Anselm of Canterbury in his *Proslogion*, since the thought expressed herein is considered to reflect its original formulation.⁵² I will begin with an explication of what I consider the crux of Anselm's argument, and proceed with Plantinga's interpretation of it insofar it is relevant for his objection to Kant's critique of the ontological argument. Although there exists a plethora of translations of Anselm's formulation of the ontological argument, one translation of it is as follows:

“Thus even the fool [i.e., the non-believer] is convinced that something than which nothing greater can be conceived is in the understanding, since when he hears this, he understands it; and whatever is understood is in the understanding. And certainly that than which a greater cannot be conceived cannot be in the understanding alone. For if it is even in the understanding alone, it can be conceived to exist in reality also, which is greater. Thus if that than which a greater cannot be conceived is in the understanding alone, then that than which a greater cannot be conceived is itself that than which a greater can be conceived. But surely this cannot be. Thus without doubt something than which a greater cannot be conceived [Henceforth abbreviated SNGT] exists, both in the understanding and in reality.”⁵³

⁵¹ A more technical work in this respect is Plantinga's *The Nature of Necessity*, in which modal logic in relation to necessity receives a great deal of attention.

⁵² *God, Freedom and Evil*, p. 85.

⁵³ Graham Oppy, “Ontological Arguments”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2012 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ontological-arguments/#StAnsOntArg> (consulted 15 May 2013).

The ontological nature of the argument is apparent from the fact that it departs from the conceived object—viz., the SNGT—in the understanding, and accordingly this initial premise does not depend on any empirical determination, but is to be regarded as an *a priori* proposition. The SNGT, then, reflects an object that has no affiliation with the world of sense, but nevertheless is understood to constitute a determinate or comprehensible conception of it in the mind of the non-believer. This apparent determinate conception seems to demarcate the concept of this object in the understanding with its actual existence. Anselm elucidates this point with the parallel of the conception of an artful composition that exists in the understanding of the painter, and its realization:

“When a painter envisions what he is about to paint, he indeed has in his understanding that which he has not yet made, but he does not yet understand that it exists. But after he has painted it, he has in his understanding that which he has made, and he understands that it exists.”⁵⁴

From this Anselm draws the conclusion that the non-believer must at least admit that the SNGT constitutes a comprehensible object in his understanding. The term *greater* in the proposition ‘that than which a greater cannot be conceived’ here reveals an assumption, namely that the distinction between an object in the understanding and its realization indicates a distinction in greatness as well. That is, the SNGT understood as an object in the understanding would reflect a *greater* being if it is thought of as having an actual existence as well. It is on the basis of this *assumption* that the argument attempts to determine God’s actual existence, since the identification of the latter with greatness implies a contradiction when its non-existence in external reality is denied. This contradiction arises because the SNGT considered as a comprehensible object in the understanding alone would reflect one of which a *greater* one can be conceived, namely one having an external existence as well. As such, one would assert an object that is *both* the greatest being conceivable and not the greatest being conceivable simultaneously, which constitutes the very contradiction.^{55,56} God defined as the SNGT,

⁵⁴ Anselm, *Proslogion*, trans. by Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Benning Press, 2000), pp. 93-4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

then, *ipso facto* implicates its necessary existence if the aforementioned assumption is considered valid. Furthermore, the SNGT should be conceived as *necessarily* existing, since a mere *contingent* external existence would indicate an entity that is less great and as such would contradict the definition of the being here considered.⁵⁷

5.1 PLANTINGA ON ANSELM'S ORIGINAL ARGUMENT

Since Anselm's original argument operates on an assumption that implies a contradiction when the actual existence of the SNGT is denied, Plantinga properly classifies it as a *reduction ad absurdum* argument. That is, God's actual existence here is considered necessary since its denial would—given the aforementioned assumption—imply a contradiction or “some other kind of absurdity.”⁵⁸ Plantinga captures the crux of Anselm's argument as follows:

- (1) GOD EXISTS IN THE UNDERSTANDING BUT NOT IN REALITY. (ASSUMPTION)
- (2) EXISTENCE IN REALITY IS GREATER THAN EXISTENCE IN THE UNDERSTANDING ALONE. (PREMISE)
- (3) GOD'S EXISTENCE IN REALITY IS CONCEIVABLE. (PREMISE)
- (4) IF GOD DID EXIST IN REALITY, THEN HE WOULD BE GREATER THAN GOD IS. [FROM (1) AND (2)]
- (5) IT IS CONCEIVABLE THAT THERE IS A BEING GREATER THAN GOD IS. [(3) AND (4)]
- (6) IT IS CONCEIVABLE THAT THERE BE A BEING GREATER THAN THE BEING THAN WHICH NOTHING GREATER CAN BE CONCEIVED. [(5) BY THE DEFINITION OF “GOD”]
- (7) IT IS FALSE THAT GOD EXISTS IN THE UNDERSTANDING BUT NOT IN REALITY.⁵⁹

Since step (6) implies a contradiction, Plantinga takes Anselm to mean that step (7) is the proper conclusion, granted that the premises are true. Furthermore, Plantinga identifies the clause “exists in the understanding” of step (1) with the meaning that “someone has *thought of* or thought about that being [i.e., God]”, and the clause “existence in reality” of step (2) is interpreted to mean that “the thing in question really

⁵⁶ Marenbon, *Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 125.

⁵⁷ Anselm, *Proslogion*, trans. by Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Benning Press, 2000), p. 94.

⁵⁸ *God, Freedom and Evil*, p. 87.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-8.

does exist.”⁶⁰ Thus conceived, the assumption that step (1) reflects logically implies the contradiction inherent in step (6), and as such step (7) seems to be a valid conclusion. Lastly, by understanding a state of affairs—such as ‘God’s existence in reality—to be *conceivable*, Plantinga takes Anselm to mean that there exists a possible world in which the state of affairs obtains.

5.2 PLANTINGA’S OBJECTION: PART ONE

The first part of Plantinga’s response to Kant’s critique of the ontological argument—such as exemplified by Anselm’s variant of it—concerns Kant’s distinction between *logical* and *real* necessity (cf. page 6). Plantinga here understands Kant to imply that “no *existential* proposition—one that asserts the existence of something or other—is necessarily true; the reason, he says, is that no *contra-existential* (the denial of an existential) is contradictory or inconsistent.”⁶¹ Plantinga summarizes this by interpreting this to mean that “no existential proposition is necessary in the broadly logical sense.”⁶² He then proceeds to dismiss Kant’s reasoning in this respect as unimpressive for several reasons. Plantinga asks us to consider the contra-existential proposition “God does not exist.”⁶³ Conforming Kant’s analysis of logical and real necessity, nothing external or internal to the object in question—viz., God—could contradict its non-existence, since “no existential proposition is necessary and no contra-existential is impossible.”⁶⁴ However, Plantinga responds, the claim here “is that *God does not exist* can’t be necessarily false.”⁶⁵ Plantinga contends that Kant here apparently confuses the fact that it is *propositions*—and not objects, parts, aspects or properties of objects—that contradict other propositions. As there exist many propositions that contradict the proposition that ‘God does not exist’, it seems that “either Kant was confused or else he expressed himself very badly indeed. And either way we *don’t* have any argument for the claim that *contra-existential propositions can’t be*

⁶⁰ God, Freedom and Evil, p. 88.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 92-3.

⁶² Ibid., p. 93.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 93.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 93.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 93.

inconsistent [italics added].”⁶⁶ Exactly why I believe Plantinga misinterprets Kant’s meaning here will be analyzed after an explication of what constitutes the second part of Plantinga’s response to Kant’s critique of the ontological argument.

5.3 PLANTINGA’S OBJECTION: PART TWO

As mentioned above, Plantinga takes Kant to mean that no existential propositions are necessarily true. Thus, the rejection of the existence of a thing cannot, on Kantian terms, be contradictory. In order to have any relevance to Anselm’s argument as is schematized above, “this must be equivalent to the claim that no proposition that merely denies the existence of a thing or things of a specified sort is contradictory or necessary false.”⁶⁷ Plantinga argues that when Kant states that nothing could externally or internally contradict the denial of the proposition “God exists”, he could not have meant that no *true* proposition could contradict it as such, since that would imply that God does not exist, which, given the regulative necessity of God’s existence, cannot properly reflect Kant’s position. If, on the other hand, Kant meant to imply that no *necessarily true* proposition could contradict the proposition in question—viz. “God exists”—it would rather seem it begs the question, “for the claim that the proposition God does not exist is not inconsistent with any necessary proposition is *logically equivalent* [Italics added] to the claim that God exists is not necessarily true.”⁶⁸ Plantinga here argues that the proposition ‘God does not exist could necessarily be true’ is logically equivalent to the proposition ‘God exists is not necessarily true’. Establishing the truth of the latter proposition, however, was not what Kant aimed for.

Plantinga then proceeds with an analysis of what he recognizes as “the burden of Kant’s objection to the ontological argument”, which is reflected by Kant’s dictum that existence cannot be considered a *real* predicate.⁶⁹ Conform the analysis of Kant’s treatment of the ontological argument abovementioned; *the content* of both the subject and its object must be identical. That is, the existence of the object of a concept cannot be part of the content of that concept. Since Kant allegedly does not elaborate on what

⁶⁶ God, Freedom and Evil, p. 94.

⁶⁷ God and Other Minds, p. 31.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

constitutes this content, Plantinga offers the following definition: “The content of a concept is the set of properties a thing must have or fall under to be an instance of that concept.”⁷⁰ Thus, the concept *Bachelor* would reflect a set of properties “that are *severally necessary* and *jointly sufficient* for the concept’s applying to something.”⁷¹

In order to make sense of Kant’s aforementioned dictum, Plantinga considers two illustrative concepts, namely that of *bachelor* and that of *superbachelor*. Properly understood, “A thing *x* is an instance of *C* (i.e., *C* applies to *x*) if and only if *x* has *P*₁, *P*₂ . . . , *P*_{*n*}.”⁷² As such, one could list the defining properties that define the concept *Bachelor*, and this concept only applies to object *x* if the latter reflects all these defining properties. One could then proceed and define the concept *superbachelor* as one that incorporates all the defining properties of the concept of *bachelor*, and include *existence* as another defining property. This would translate to “*x* is a superbachelor if and only if *x* has *P*₁, *P*₂ . . . , *P*_{*n*}, **and *x* exists** [emphasis mine].”⁷³ We may then mistakenly suppose that since it is a necessary truth that bachelors are unmarried, so it is a necessary truth that superbachelors exist. However, this would imply that superbachelors are *defined into existence*, which is just what Kant warns us to avoid. That is, since the proposition “everything that is a bachelor is unmarried” properly reflects a necessary truth, we may be tempted to think superbachelors necessarily exist as well, since existence is incorporated as a defining property of the concept. Accordingly, it would only follow that the proposition “everything that is a superbachelor exists” is necessarily true. But of course, Plantinga rightly affirms, from this one cannot infer that there *are* any superbachelors: “All that follows is that ‘all the superbachelors there are exist’, which is not very startling.”⁷⁴ Since the concept of *superbachelor* includes all the defining properties of the concept of *bachelor*, it follows that every superbachelor is a bachelor. Furthermore, if the proposition “there are some bachelors” is contingent, so would the proposition “there are some superbachelors.” Since both concepts share a set of identical properties, any object that is an instance of one of these two concepts *necessarily is* an instance of the other concept as well, and as such they can be

⁷⁰ God and Other Minds, p. 34.

⁷¹ God, Freedom and Evil, p. 96.

⁷² Ibid., 96.

⁷³ Ibid., 96.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 96.

considered *equivalent*. Otherwise put, “it is impossible that there exists an object to which one but not the other of these two concepts applies.”⁷⁵

Having come this far, Plantinga understands Kant’s critique pertaining to existence being no *real* predicate to mean the following. A predicate or property can only be considered real if its addition to a set of defining properties of a concept implies another concept that is *not equivalent* to the former one. That is, since the addition of existence to the set of defining properties that constitutes the concept of *bachelor* implies another concept—viz., the concept of *superbachelor*—that is equivalent to it, existence cannot be understood as a *real* property. However, Plantinga recognizes, “if this is what he [Kant] means, he’s certainly right. But is it relevant to the ontological argument? Couldn’t Anselm thank Kant for this interesting point and proceed merrily on his way? Where did he [Anselm] try to define God into being by adding existence to a list of properties that defined some concept?”⁷⁶ As such, Plantinga is convinced that Anselm’s argument is not susceptible to this particular objection, since *prima facie*, nowhere in his procedure did Anselm—explicitly—add existence to a concept—viz., the SNGT—that “has application contingently if at all.”⁷⁷

5.4 AN UNSUCCESSFUL MODAL VERSION OF ANSELM’S ARGUMENT

Although Plantinga concludes that Kant’s dictum is not as such directly applicable to Anselm’s argument, he recognizes that the second premise of the argument “is most puzzling here.”⁷⁸ That is, the premise ‘existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone’ seems to suggest that existence is a great-making property. As such, Anselm seems of the conviction that “a non-existent being would be greater than in fact it is, if it did exist.”⁷⁹ Plantinga then proceeds to restate Anselm’s argument in terms of modal logic, which incorporates the notion of ‘possible worlds’. Accordingly, the second premise of Anselm’s argument could be restated as follows: “for any being *x* and

⁷⁵ God, Freedom and Evil, p. 97.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 97.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 98.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 98.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 98.

worlds W and W' , if x exists in W but not in W' , then x 's greatness in W exceeds x 's greatness in W' .”⁸⁰

Plantinga then states that Anselm perhaps means to say that “if a being x does not exist in world W (and there is a world in which x does exist), then *there is at least one world* in which the greatness of x exceeds the greatness of x in W .”⁸¹ This reformulation of the second premise, then, is incorporated into a schematization of Anselm’s argument in the following modal version:

(8) GOD DOES NOT EXIST IN THE ACTUAL WORLD.

(9) FOR ANY BEING x AND WORLD W , IF x DOES NOT EXIST IN W , THEN THERE IS A WORLD W' SUCH THAT THE GREATNESS OF x IN W' EXCEEDS THE GREATNESS OF x IN W .

(10) THERE IS A POSSIBLE WORLD IN WHICH GOD EXISTS.

(11) IF GOD DOES NOT EXIST IN THE ACTUAL WORLD, THEN THERE IS A WORLD W' SUCH THAT THE GREATNESS OF GOD IN W' EXCEEDS THE GREATNESS OF GOD IN THE ACTUAL WORLD. [FROM (9)]

(12) SO THERE IS A WORLD W' SUCH THAT THE GREATNESS OF GOD IN W' EXCEEDS THE GREATNESS OF GOD IN THE ACTUAL WORLD. [(8) AND (11)]

(13) SO THERE IS A POSSIBLE BEING x AND A WORLD W' SUCH THAT THE GREATNESS OF x IN W' EXCEEDS THE GREATNESS OF GOD IN ACTUALITY. [(12)]

(14) HENCE IT’S POSSIBLE THAT THERE BE A BEING GREATER THAN GOD IS. [(12)]

(15) SO IT’S POSSIBLE THAT THERE BE A BEING GREATER THAN THE BEING THAN WHICH IT’S NOT POSSIBLE THAT THERE BE A GREATER. [(14)], REPLACING “GOD” BY WHAT IT ABBREVIATES.

(16) IT’S NOT POSSIBLE THAT THERE BE A BEING GREATER THAN THE BEING THAN WHICH IT’S NOT POSSIBLE THAT THERE BE A GREATER.⁸²

Prima facie, Plantinga concedes, this restatement of Anselm’s arguments appears to be “pretty formidable.”⁸³ Upon critical reflection, however, the argument seems to beg the question. This is, according to Plantinga, because premise (9) “is talking about worlds

⁸⁰ God, Freedom and Evil, p. 99.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 99.

⁸² Ibid., p. 100.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 101.

and beings.”⁸⁴ Step (11) logically follows from step (9), since here something is *asserted* of God and the *actual world* that according to step (9) “holds of every being and world.”⁸⁵ This implicates, however, that the inference from (9) to (11) demands the additional premise that God is a being. But, Plantinga, rightly asks, “doesn’t this statement—that God is a being—imply that *there is* or *exists* a being than which it’s not possible that there be a greater?”⁸⁶ If so, the inference from (9) to (11) is only admissible if we grant the truth of the conclusion, which amounts to no more than a *petitio principii*. Plantinga proceeds with the remark that step (13) properly is about possible beings, and as such it must perhaps be acknowledged that God is a *possible* being. However, the conception of the existence of a possible being seems puzzling. One can wonder whether there “*are* possible beings—that is, *merely* possible beings, beings that don’t in fact exist? If so, what sorts of things are they? Do they have properties? How are we to think of them? What is their status? And what reasons are there for supposing that there are any such peculiar items at all?”⁸⁷

Although these questions may pose true problems for the argument under consideration, Plantinga thinks these can be avoided when one substitutes *possible beings*—and the worlds in which they do or don’t exist—for *properties* and the worlds in which they do or don’t have *instances*. Thus, “instead of speaking of a possible being named by the phrase, ‘the being than which it’s not possible that there be a greater,’ we may speak of the **property** [emphasis mine] *having an unsurpassable degree of greatness*—that is, *having a degree of greatness such that it’s not possible that there exist a being having more.*”⁸⁸ As such, the argument properly has as its object the possibility of an unsurpassable great being, or the instantiation of an unparalleled greatness to which such an object must relate. However, Plantinga contends, the conclusion that step (16) reflects is ambiguous, since it is not clear whether the contradiction is to be deduced from a comparison with a being that either (16’) enjoys its greatness *in the worlds where its greatness is at a maximum* or (16’’) enjoys its greatness *in the actual world*.

⁸⁴ God, Freedom and Evil, p. 101.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 101.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 101.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 102.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 102.

If step (16) is identified with step (16'), the argument's *reductio* cannot be obtained, since step (16') does not contradict step (15). That is, step (15) does not state "that there is a possible being whose greatness exceeds that enjoyed by the greatest possible being *in a world where the latter's greatness is at a maximum* [which would contradict step (16')]; it says only that there is a possible being whose greatness exceeds that enjoyed by the greatest possible being *in the actual world*." Thus, step (15) merely speaks of a possible being whose greatness surpasses that of the greatest possible being that **exists in this world**, the greatness here not necessarily reflecting a maximum. If, on the other hand, step (16) is identified with step (16''), we have no way of knowing whether the latter step is true. That is, it is not necessary the case that the being under consideration has its maximal degree of greatness in the *actual* world, since it is conceivable that this maximum in fact exists in *another possible* world than the actual one.⁸⁹ Hence, this version of Anselm's argument fails.

5.5 PLANTINGA'S MODAL VERSION OF ANSELM'S ARGUMENT

Plantinga continues with an analysis of yet another modal version of Anselm's argument, which he initially deems to be defective as well. However, here he is convinced the argument can be repaired if one incorporates the notions of *greatness* and *excellence*. That is, "perhaps we should make a distinction here between *greatness* and *excellence*. A being's excellence in a given world *W*, let us say, depends upon the properties it has in *W*; its *greatness* in *W* depends upon these properties but also upon what it is like in other worlds."⁹⁰ As such, a maximal degree of greatness (instantiated in a world *W*) implies a maximal degree of excellence in "every possible world."⁹¹ Plantinga introduces a traditional and typical theistic identity of God when he considers the properties that are to constitute a being's excellence; "that is to say, a being *B* has maximal excellence in a world *W* only if *B* has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in *W*—only if *B* would have been omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect if *W* had been actual."⁹² It is then recognized that the ontological arguments here discussed function on the

⁸⁹ God, Freedom and Evil, pp. 103-4.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 107.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 108.

⁹² Ibid., p. 108.

assumption that it makes sense to speak of “possible beings that don’t in fact exist.” Step (13), for instance, reflects a distinction between a possible being that does not in fact exist and one that does. Although Plantinga believes this assumption is “either unintelligible or necessarily false”, he considers it no threat to his version of the argument⁹³. This allegedly is so because one can restate the argument so as to incorporate *properties*—e.g., greatness or excellence—instead of *possible beings*. This restatement of the argument, then, translates to the following schematization:

(17) THERE IS A POSSIBLE WORLD IN WHICH MAXIMAL GREATNESS IS INSTANTIATED.

(18) NECESSARILY, A BEING IS MAXIMALLY GREAT ONLY IF IT HAS MAXIMAL EXCELLENCE IN EVERY WORLD.

(19) NECESSARILY, A BEING HAS MAXIMAL EXCELLENCE IN EVERY WORLD ONLY IF IT HAS OMNISCIENCE, OMNIPOTENCE, AND MORAL PERFECTION IN EVERY WORLD.⁹⁴

Accordingly, Plantinga contends, if step (17) is true:

“there is a possible world *W* such that if it had been actual, then there would have existed a being that was omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect [maximal excellence]; this being, furthermore, would have had these qualities in every possible world. So it follows that if *W* had been actual, it would have been *impossible* that there be no such being. That is, if *W* had been actual, [the proposition] (20) **there is no omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being** would have been an impossible proposition.”⁹⁵

Plantinga considers this argument valid if the premise that step (17) reflects is accepted. That is, step (20) reflects a valid conclusion if one contends that “the instantiation of maximal greatness is possible” reflects a true proposition. As such, Plantinga “thinks this version of the ontological argument is sound.”⁹⁶

⁹³ God, Freedom and Evil, p. 110.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 111.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 110-1.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 112.

6. THE RELEVANCE OF PLANTINGA'S RESPONSE

Although Plantinga's objection to Kant's critique of the ontological argument certainly reflects an interesting one, I believe it does not succeed. That is, even Plantinga's own version of Anselm's argument fails to avoid Kant's critique. In the remainder of this thesis I will focus on two points. First, I will show that although Kant's dictum does not seem directly applicable to Anselm's argument, a closer inspection reveals it in fact does. Second, I will show that Plantinga's version of Anselm's argument—including its incorporation of the properties *greatness* and *excellence* so as to render it unsusceptible to Kant's critique—fails as well. Finally, it will be shown that even apart from Kant's critique, Plantinga's modal version cannot succeed on the ground that its proposed identity of God as defined by His excellence reflects a set of mutually exclusive properties.

6.1 KANT'S DICTUM IN RELATION TO ANSELM'S ARGUMENT

Since a successful outcome of Anselm's argument would imply that the proposition 'God exists' is necessarily true, Plantinga's critique of Kant's conviction that 'no contra-existential proposition or judgment is contradictory' is understandable. This, indeed, seems to imply that 'no existential proposition is necessary' in that no subject of a proposition could be understood to reflect an object the existence of which—in phenomenal reality—is unconditional. However, as abovementioned, Plantinga here emphasizes that the proper claim in question is to be indicated by the proposition 'God does not exist can't be necessarily false'. I think it concerns this focus on the latter claim where Plantinga commits a first mistake. That is, nowhere in his critique of the ontological argument does one find Kant speaking of contra-existential propositions—except for the proposition 'god is not', by which Kant does not so much imply that this proposition 'can't be necessarily false', but rather intends to exemplify the difference between necessary judgments and necessary objects.⁹⁷ Kant only considers existential propositions, an example of which was the identical proposition 'God is omnipotent', and it certainly seems evident to claim [as Kant does] that no denial of the subject including all its predicates could implicate a contradiction. Granted that it is true that Kant has not

⁹⁷ CPR, A595/B623.

given an explicit argument for this claim, it is clear that the *onus probandi* lies upon the individual that postulates a positive (and necessary) existence of an object. Furthermore, although Plantinga's characterization of Kant's dictum pertaining to existence being no *real* predicate seems correct, a closer inspection reveals it at least applies to Anselm's original argument, albeit it not explicitly. That is, the assumption "God exists in the understanding but not in reality" can be said to reflect a comprehensible object that has all the defining properties save existence external to the understanding, and the premise "existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone" attaches a degree of greatness to an object that exists external to the understanding (as well). Since greatness here is positively coupled with existence external to the understanding, it is evident that existence must be regarded as a *great-making property*. Since greatness here implies a qualitative difference, this distinction between existence in reality and in the understanding seems to reflect a *real* difference as well. That is, it would not make sense to regard an object as being greater than another one if this difference in greatness is not qualified. As such, Anselm qualitatively employs *existence* in reality as just this great-making property, and consequently Kant's dictum remains applicable.

6.2 KANT'S DICTUM IN RELATION TO PLANTINGA'S MODAL ARGUMENT

As is mentioned above, Plantinga attempts to repair a defective modal version of Anselm's argument by incorporating a traditional theistic identity of the SNGT. This being defined as maximally great and excellent, then, seems to allow for Plantinga to commit to the conviction that "we no longer need the supposition that necessary existence is a perfection; for obviously a being can't be omnipotent [as implicated by its excellence] in a given world unless it *exists* in that world."⁹⁸ Furthermore, Plantinga contends that his version of Anselm's argument avoids a dependence on the assumption that it makes sense to speak of "possible beings that don't in fact exist." It is his shift to discourse about *properties being instantiated* rather than *possible beings possessing properties in this or that world* that avoids this alleged difficulty.

⁹⁸ God, Freedom, and Evil, p. 108.

However, it seems that the inconceivability of the mentioned assumption only appears as such within a modal approach as is conducted by Plantinga. That is, only if the possibility of a being is identified with an existence in a possible world, does the assumption appear queer. However, it rather seems Plantinga is the one who is confused here, since there clearly exists a difference between judgments and objects as they exist in themselves. A judgment that contains a conception of a possible being does not imply a *real existence* in a *possible* world, but reflects an object of thought only. Accordingly, it is perfectly conceivable to speak of ‘possible objects that don’t in fact exist’, since objects of thought are possible yet do not exist in the relevant sense.

Furthermore, to say that this or that property is instantiated in this or that world necessarily implies an object to which it applies. Thus, the aforementioned shift seems more like a rhetorical trick, since the instantiation of omnipotence in a possible world, for instance, still implicates an object to which it must apply. To say that Kant’s dictum here is not applicable because the existence of the being in question is inferred from the instantiation of omnipotence is ill-founded, since this inference here actually is a postulation of the object in disguise. In Kant’s terms: “God is omnipotent; that is a necessary judgment. Omnipotence cannot be cancelled if you posit a divinity, i.e., an infinite being, which is identical with that concept. But if you say, **God is not** [sic], then neither omnipotence nor any other of his predicates is given; for they are all cancelled together with the subject, and in this thought not the least contradiction shows itself.”⁹⁹ Hence, the instantiation of omnipotence—as a necessary property of the SNGT—in a possible world only implicates a contradiction if the object is presupposed (or in this case, inferred). If the existence of the object is denied in the first place, however, the possible instantiation of omnipotence in a possible world does not on its own grounds establish an absolute and necessary existence of God.

⁹⁹ CPR, A595/B623.

6.3 PLANTINGA'S MODAL ARGUMENT AND LOGICAL INCONSISTENCY

Even if we allow Plantinga's modal version to be exempt from Kantian critique, it seems defective on its own grounds. That is, the traditional theistic identity that Plantinga adopts and incorporates in his version of Anselm's argument suffers from logical inconsistency. As is described above, Plantinga's application of *excellence* implies an entity that exhibits *omnipotence*, *omniscience* and *moral perfection*. It seems evident, however, that such a set of properties is logically inconsistent, since a coexistence of these properties is mutually exclusive.

The problem of *divine foreknowledge* here suffices to illustrate one such inconsistency. That is, if omniscience entails certain knowledge about all state of affairs of the past, present and future, this would include certain knowledge of any action that any individual will commit at every moment. If every such act is understood as committed *freely*, this would imply that the individual in question *could* have executed another action at a specific moment. For instance, if Kant woke up at 4:00 a.m. and committed the action of having a walk at 4:15 a.m., his possession of a free will would grant him the ability *to commit another action instead*. It is this very ability that could cause the omniscient entity—viz., the SNGT—to have a false belief, which *ipso facto* contradicts omniscience properly understood. Hence, the simultaneous coexistence of the properties omniscience and omnipotence reflects a mutual exclusivity in the following sense: omnipotence implies the power to create *free* individuals, but omniscience cancels the possibility of such individuals to exist, since the aforementioned ability would contradict omniscience. Consequently, the entity in question is *unable* to create such individuals, which cancels its omnipotence. Conversely, by its omnipotence the entity is considered able to create free individuals, but this latter kind of freedom implies a degree of ignorance in the aforementioned entity, and as such omnipotence here logically annuls omniscience.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ "Ontological Argument", by Kenneth Eimar Himma, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ont-arg/#H4> (consulted 15 May 2013).

7. CONCLUSION

In the relevant section of the CPR, Kant analyzes and criticizes the three only deemed possible species of proofs for an absolute determination of God. The first category of proofs in this regard is characterized by an attempt to establish an absolute existence of God based upon an *ontological* determination. The ontological proof, then, departs from the concept of an absolutely necessary being, and as such attempts to deduce God's necessary existence from it. Kant initially remarks, however, that it is this very concept that is in need of a critical investigation. One consequence of the ontological employment of the concept of a necessary being is the identification of the latter with an *unconditional* existence. This presupposes that the conception of such a being—viz., a being that exists unconditionally—reflects a determinate content in the understanding. Kant here argues that the aforementioned identification is unwarranted, that is, necessity as modality always is *conditional*. As such, unconditional existence rather seems to reflect an indeterminate or unintelligible concept.

Furthermore, it is here where Kant stresses the importance of the distinction between *logical* and *real* necessity. The aforementioned unintelligibility of the concept in question, Kant contends, can be attributed to a failure to distinguish between judgments or propositions and objects as they exist in themselves. That is, *logical* necessity is to apply to judgments, and *real* necessity applies to objects and their existence. While it is true that the proposition 'a triangle has three angles' considered as a whole reflects absolute necessity, the predicate 'three angles' is conditional, i.e., only when the triangle is *asserted* is its predicate absolutely necessary. Properly understood, the triangle *itself* is not absolutely necessary or unconditional, but merely reflects a possibility. Consequently, if existence is considered as an identical predicate in the proposition 'God exists', its negation can only entail a contradiction if its subject is postulated in the first place. If, then, one cancels this very subject—viz., God—nothing external or internal could contradict it, since all its identical predicates are then logically annulled as well.

One exception to this reasoning may consist of the concept of 'the most real being'. Since this being is thought to contain *all* reality, existence is understood as an internal element of it. Although Kant admits that such a being reflects a legitimate possibility, it is rejected as being tautological. That is, the incorporation of existence in the conception of a merely possible subject *presupposes* the actuality of the object it denotes. Furthermore,

the negation of the subject in question—viz., the most real being—cannot entail a contradiction, since the object to which it refers is properly synthetic and consequently contingent only.

In accordance with Kant's epistemology, real existence seems to be satisfied by an actuality in phenomenal reality. As such, the concept of a subject in a proposition is not enlarged when its object has an actual determination in phenomenal reality, since this determination reflects a mere positing of an identical concept. It is here where Kant's famous dictum—viz., existence being no real predicate—applies, since it targets the erroneous assumption that Kant recognizes in the ontological category of proofs thus far articulated. That is, for a predicate or property to be a *real*, it must effectively determine a thing and as such enlarge the concept of it. Accordingly, the difference between an object that exists solely in thought and its phenomenal counterpart reflects no *real* difference in concept, since the conceptual content of both objects properly is identical. If one attempts to incorporate existence as a real predicate in the concept of God, it cannot on its own determine its actuality in phenomenal reality, since existence does not reflect an additional content as such. Such an attempt merely *posits* the actuality of the being in question, the latter which is just what the ontological approach aims to determine, but fails to accomplish as such.

Furthermore, Kant continues, the concept of God does not reflect a possible object of experience. Accordingly, there exists no touchstone on the basis of which can be assessed whether the object in question has an actual existence in an external reality. Existence for us is necessarily tied to phenomenal reality and as such it is essentially subjective. God considered as an object of pure thought, then, reflects a possibility only, and its hypostatization cannot be determined solely on the basis of this. As was analyzed extensively above, Kant explicitly argues that both the cosmological and the physico-theological proofs ultimately depend on the validity of the ontological one, and as such I will refrain from reiterating the former two proofs here. Accordingly, Plantinga's objection is raised against the only deemed possible approach that aims to establish an absolute determination of God, viz., the ontological proof. Although it is clear that Kant's objection to the ontological proof was explicitly directed at Descartes' reformulation of it, it seems plausible to extend this objection to Anselm's formulation, since it is here where the proof first originated. As such, Plantinga initially embarks on an analysis of

Kant's objection in relation to Anselm's original formulation of the proof, and subsequently puts forward a modal reformulation of it—the latter which Plantinga considered to be immune from any Kantian critique whatsoever.

In this thesis I have shown that Plantinga's interesting attempts to dismiss Kant's critique to both Anselm's original formulation of the ontological proof and Plantinga's own modal reformulation of it do not succeed. Anselm's original ontological proof is susceptible to Kant's critique as follows. First, Plantinga's understanding of Kant's distinction between real and logical necessity seems inadequate. Kant here emphasizes the difference between necessary propositions and necessary objects. Considering only existential propositions, Kant claims that no such proposition could entail a contradiction when its subject is cancelled, since all its proper predicates are cancelled simultaneously. While Plantinga is correct insofar as Kant does not offer an explicit argument for this claim, it is evident that the burden of proof lies with the individual who asserts a *positive* claim as such—which in this scenario amounts to the *assertion* of a subject the cancellation of which **does in fact** entail an internal or external contradiction. Although Plantinga's conceptualization of Kant's thoughts on *real* predicates seems correct, he fails to see its applicability to Anselm's proof. While Plantinga is correct insofar as Anselm did refrain from *explicitly* defining God into existence, the coupling of greatness with existence in reality in the proof implies the employment of a *real* great-making property nevertheless. As such, Kant's dictum seems in fact applicable to Anselm's argument, albeit indirectly.

Furthermore, Plantinga's own modal reformulation of Anselm's original proof seems unsuccessful as well. That is, Plantinga's attempt to render it unsusceptible to Kant's dictum in fact makes it susceptible to Kantian critique of another sort. Besides attributing to all other—except his own—formulations of the proof here discussed a dependence on the apparent nonsensical assumption that it is intelligible to speak of possible beings that don't in fact exist, Plantinga explicitly states that his formulation of the proof does not deploy necessary existence as a perfection or real predicate. However, Plantinga's suggestion to speak of *instantiations* of properties instead of *possible beings* possessing properties so as to avoid the assumption mentioned above does not suffice to render it immune from Kantian critique altogether. This is because Plantinga's modal reformulation seems to reflect a failure to recognize the Kantian

difference between judgments and things as they exist in themselves. That is, the unintelligibility that Plantinga attributes to the aforementioned assumption only appears as such when it is assessed within a modal framework as is envisaged by Plantinga himself. Accordingly, the subject of a judgment reflects an object of thought only, the possible existence of which does not *ipso facto* implicate a *real*—viz., phenomenal—existence in a possible world. Thus construed, the assumption in question in fact seems perfectly intelligible. Furthermore, Plantinga’s turn to the instantiation of properties so as to avoid the aforementioned assumption seems more like a rhetorical trick, since the instantiation of a property in a possible world still introduces an object to which applies. As such, the object is introduced only subsequently, and its alleged necessary existence is posited without proper justification. The existence of God, then, is inferred from the instantiation of an identical property in a possible world, and consequently Kant’s critique pertaining to the impossibility of contradiction by negating the subject and all its predicates still seems applicable. Consequently, the deployment of instantiations of properties does not on its own establish an absolute and necessary existence of God.

Apart from the applicability of Kantian critique, Plantinga’s modal reformulation of Anselm’s argument seems defective on its own grounds as well. That is, the typical theistic identity that Plantinga adopts and incorporates into his modal argument suffers from logical inconsistency. More specifically, it is argued that God’s *excellence* here defined implies a set of mutually exclusive properties.

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