

GOD

§ 72. The Kant-Frege view

After psychology and cosmology, Kant has a final chapter on theology. This treats three traditional arguments for God's existence, starting with the so-called *ontological argument*, which goes somewhat as follows.

If the word 'God' means, in part, 'being which is omnipotent, benevolent, omniscient . . .', then anyone who says 'God is not omnipotent' either contradicts himself or is not using 'God' with its normal meaning. Now, 'God' means, in part, 'being which is *existent*, omnipotent, benevolent . . .' That implies that anyone who says 'God is not existent' either contradicts himself or is not using 'God' in its normal meaning; whence it follows that 'God is existent', normally understood, is guaranteed as true just by the meaning of its subject-term.

Kant rejects this argument because, he says, 'existent' has no right to occur in a list of terms purporting to express what an item must be like in order to qualify for a certain label. Existent things are not things of a kind; existence is not a state or quality or process; 'existent' is not a predicate. "'Exist' . . . is a verb, but it does not describe something that things do all the time, like breathing, only quieter – ticking over, as it were, in a metaphysical sort of way.'¹

Kant puts this by saying that 'existent' is not a 'real predicate' or a 'determining predicate'. It and its cognates can behave like predicates in a sentence, he admits, as when we say 'Unicorns don't exist', which may seem to report something that unicorns don't do. But that only qualifies it as a grammatical or 'logical' predicate:

Anything . . . can . . . serve as a logical predicate; the subject can even be predicated of itself. . . But a *determining* predicate is a predicate which is added to the concept of the subject and enlarges it. . . 'Bring' is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing. (626)

Recall that a thing's 'determinations' are its properties or qualities. To 'determine' something is to discover or report detail about it.

This general view about the concept of existence was adumbrated,

¹ J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford, 1962), p. 68n.

against Descartes, by Gassendi. Descartes argues that 'God' means '...existent...' because it means 'being with all perfections' and existence is a perfection:

Existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than can its having three angles equal to two right angles be separated from the essence of a triangle...; and so it is just as impossible to conceive a God (that is, a supremely perfect being) who lacks existence (that is to say, who lacks a certain perfection), as to conceive of a mountain which has no valley.²

Gassendi denies that existence is a perfection or indeed a property or quality of any sort:

Existence is a perfection neither in God nor in anything else; it is rather that in the absence of which there is no perfection. For that which does not exist has neither perfection nor imperfection, and that which exists and has various perfections does not have its existence as a particular perfection... but as that by means of which the thing itself equally with its perfections is in existence.

Descartes' reply to this is unsatisfactory:

I do not see to what class of reality you wish to assign existence, nor do I see why it may not be said to be a property... taking 'property' to cover any attribute or anything which can be predicated of a thing.

This amounts to saying that 'existent' must be a determining predicate because it is a logical or grammatical predicate.

One piece of evidence for the Kantian view is given by Moore.³ He contrasts (a) 'Tame tigers exist' with (b) 'Tame tigers growl'. One might think that each of these reports something that tame tigers do, but there is a deep-lying dissimilarity which Moore displays by considering the question 'All of them or only some of them?' Asked of (b), this makes perfect sense: perhaps every tame tiger growls, perhaps some do and others do not. But the question cannot be applied to (a): we cannot suppose that perhaps some tame tigers exist while others do not.

Kant rests a good deal on a different line of argument.⁴ He says that we entertain a possibility by considering some concept built out of determining predicates, and that to ask whether the possibility is realized is to ask whether that concept applies to any object. If 'existing' were a determining predicate, Kant argues, then a bare affirmative

² *Fifth Meditation*, about one third of the way through. Next two quotations: *Fifth Objections to the Meditations*, Haldane & Ross, p. 186; Descartes' reply, *ibid.* p. 228.

³ G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London, 1959), pp. 117-20.

⁴ The paragraph on 626-7, and start of the following paragraph. Quotation below is from 628.

answer to the question could never be given. Suppose the question is 'Are there any tigers?' The answer that there are tigers means that some existing things are tigers; and that, if 'existing' is a determining predicate, asserts that something instantiates not merely the concept *tiger* but the richer concept *existing tiger*. An affirmative answer to our question is always over-informative, as though 'Are there tigers?' had to be answered by 'Yes, there are striped tigers' or 'Yes, there are fat tigers'. In Kant's words:

By whatever and by however many predicates we may think a thing – even if we completely determine it – we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing *is*. Otherwise, it would not be exactly the same thing that exists, but something more than we had thought in the concept; and we could not, therefore, say that the exact object of my concept exists.

This argument is resistible. An opponent could reply that just as the answer 'Yes, there are tigers' means 'Yes, there are existent tigers', so the question 'Are there tigers?' means 'Are there existent tigers?'; in which case the answer does not say more than was asked.

The quoted passage also suggests that if 'existent' were a determining predicate then we could not entertain some concept and find that precisely *it* was instantiated: if instantiation involved existence, 'it would not be exactly the same thing that exists, but something more than we had thought in the concept.' But what exists is *always* 'more than we had thought in the concept'! Whatever one 'thinks in a concept' must be abstract, omitting answers to at least some questions of detail, and so a reality corresponding to any such thought will always have some features with regard to which the thought was, as it were, silent. Kant implies that we might 'completely determine' a thing, but that is impossible. Anyway, if we could do so, i.e. could think the totality of a thing's determining predicates, perhaps that *would* involve us automatically in thinking of it as existing. In assuming the contrary, Kant is simply begging the question in favour of his view that 'existent' is not a determining predicate. So this argument of Kant's is, in two distinct ways, a complete failure.⁵

Yet I share the widespread belief that this discussion of Kant's contains something which is important and may be true. We should see him as presenting, in the garb of bad arguments, a considerable thesis or

⁵ I here follow J. Shaffer, 'Existence, Predication, and the Ontological Argument', *Mind* (1962), reprinted in T. Penelhum and J. J. MacIntosh (eds.), *The First Critique* (Belmont, Calif., 1969)

hypothesis about the logic of existence. It is at once an answer to Descartes' 'I do not see to what class of reality you wish to assign existence', and an amplification of Gassendi's sketchy remark that existence 'is that in the absence of which there is no perfection'.

Gassendi did well to avoid saying more than he knew. Lacking a positive theory about the concept of existence, he nevertheless saw clearly that an acceptable theory must not imply that existence is a property. Descartes' contemporary Clerelier, who translated the Objections to the *Meditations* and Descartes' Replies to them, must have found the sketchiness of Gassendi's treatment of existence intolerable. For he turned Gassendi's Latin 'It is that in the absence of which . . .' into his own French 'It is a *form or an act* in the absence of which . . . !' That is no good at all, of course, but some positive theory was needed, and more than a century later Kant provided it.

According to Kant, every existence-statement says about a concept that it is instantiated, rather than saying about an object that it exists. This is an important precursor of the view of Frege that any legitimate existential statement must be built out of propositional atoms of the form 'There is an *F*', where *F* stands for a determining predicate.⁶ According to this Kant-Frege view, the real form of 'Tigers exist' is not like that of 'Tigers growl', but rather like that of 'There are tigers', or 'The concept of tigerhood is instantiated'. Granted that Kant's arguments fall far short of proving this hypothesis, they do at least illustrate and elucidate it; and the hypothesis itself is a philosophical contribution which deserves attention and which may even be true.

The Fregean view about existence can be applied to philosophical problems, as follows. Suppose that a purported existence-statement *S* is somehow problematical. (1) If *S* remains problematical when it is quantified, i.e. translated into the form ' . . . there is an *F* . . . ', then this is a problem which the Fregean view does not solve. (2) If the problem disappears when *S* is quantified, then it has been solved by the Fregean view. (3) If *S* cannot be quantified, then the 'problem' it posed was illusory.

⁶ 'Existential propositions are ones which can be expressed in German with *es gibt* [in English with "there is" or "there are"]. This expression is not followed immediately by a name in the singular or by a word with the definite article, but always by a concept-word [determining predicate] without a definite article. In such existential propositions something is said about a concept' G. Frege, *Nachgelassene Schriften* (ed. H. Hermes et al., Hamburg, 1969), Vol. I, p. 274. I am indebted to Howard Jackson for showing me this passage. For a remark by Frege about the ontological argument, see P. T. Geach and M. Black (eds.), *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege* (Oxford, 1952), p. 38n.

Because of (3), the ontological argument can be dissolved. It is based on a definition of the form: 'x is God' means 'x is omniscient and x is omnipotent and x is existent and x is benevolent and . . .', and there is no way that the component 'x is existent' can be quantified, i.e. expressed in the Fregean form '...there is an F...'.⁷

There are difficulties in this position. For example, the statement 'I exist' seems to be legitimate and yet not quantifiable. There is also the problem, discussed in §21 above, that one cannot report an absolute existence-change in quantified form. In this chapter, however, I adopt the Kant-Frege view as a working hypothesis. The only live controversy I shall enter concerns its powers, not its truth.⁷

§73. Existence and necessary existence

Norman Malcolm has distinguished two ontological arguments, one of which he says is valid and does prove the existence of God.⁸ The argument whose invalidity Malcolm concedes is the one I have been discussing. It is invalid, he says, 'because it rests on the false doctrine that existence is a perfection'; and he endorses Kant's handling of this matter, while rightly saying that Kant's position has not yet been conclusively established. The second argument involves a definiens which includes not just 'existent' but '*necessarily* existent'. That, Malcolm thinks, makes it safe from Kant's criticisms yet still adequate to prove the desired conclusion.

Malcolm is right to this extent: there is a form of argument which can be used to support the view that 'existent' is not a determining predicate, though it gives no support at all to the view that '*necessarily* existent' is not a determining predicate. We have some ways of using 'existent' which can be rapidly and easily quantified: 'Tigers are existent' becomes 'There are tigers'. If we try to use the word as a determining predicate, by giving it a role in which it purports to mark off things of a kind, it always turns out to be vacuous. If I ask you to bring me a beer, and then add '...a cold one', that could make the request harder to comply with; but if I add '...an existent one', your task is not made harder, because an existent beer is just a beer. But it is not obvious that necessarily existent things are not things of a kind. If I ask

⁷ For further discussion see W. C. Kneale, 'Is Existence a Predicate?' in H. Feigl and W. Sellars (eds.), *Readings in Philosophical Analysis* (New York, 1949), and W. P. Alston, 'The Ontological Argument Revisited', *The Philosophical Review* (1960).

⁸ N. Malcolm, 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments', *The Philosophical Review* (1960). The remark about Kant's position is on p. 44.