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THEOLOGICAL NECESSITY

I. THE STATUS OF THE TERM 'EXISTENCE'

Anselm begins his famous ontological argument by describing God as the being greater than which none is conceivable. His description seems coherent and intelligible. Consequently a divine being thus described may be spoken of as existing in the understanding. But if so, He must *actually* exist as well, otherwise a being greater than Him could possibly exist, namely, one of whom the additional great-making-term 'actual existence' may also be predicated. The result would be a contradiction, for we would now have to concede, that contrary to our initial claim, the being harbored in our understanding is inferior to the greatest since another being who had actual existence would be greater. To avoid the contradiction we must concede actual existence to the absolutely perfect being.

Kant's well known objection against this argument was that it treats 'existence' as if it were a great-making-predicate, implying that actual existence per se confers upon its subject greater excellence than what is had by a qualitatively identical non-existent being. In fact, according to Kant, 'existence' not only fails to be a great-making-predicate, it is not a predicate at all.

Though the impact of Kant's position on the issue was serious enough, he was followed by a number of philosophers who set out to demonstrate in a clear and compelling manner what precisely prevents existence from qualifying as a predicate. G. E. Moore, for instance, made a number of telling points in his effort to exhibit the absurdities we would be led into if we did treat existence as a predicate.[1] His best remembered argument has been that while 'some tame tigers growl' makes sense, 'some tame tigers exist' does not. Others have cited different illustrations more or less along the same lines.

Still, while Moore and others have produced examples which indeed show that the term 'existence' is unlike any run of the mill predicate, they have neglected to argue *why* we cannot retreat to a position less damaging to Anselm, and maintain that while 'existence' does not belong to the category of standard predicates, it is still a genuine predicate. Secondly, which seems an even more serious omission, they have not attempted to get to the root of the matter and identify the ultimate source of the peculiar features of

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[1] *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), pp. 117–20.

existence which prevent it from functioning the way 'growling' is able to function.

II. 'EXISTENCE' IS NOT A DIFFERENTIATING TERM

Let me venture to add one more – not too implausible – reason why existence differs so fundamentally from standard properties. We cannot be said to have fully understood the nature of a given individual i unless we are able to answer correctly anyone of the indefinitely many questions that may be asked about it. To acquire such ability (through one's own efforts and not through testimony of others), we must have had the chance to examine i very thoroughly. Once we have located i and have got hold of it and are thus able to study every aspect of i we shall be able to answer every inquiry concerning it by performing the relevant examination. Once we have reached this stage we shall be able to individuate i for the benefit of others who then will be able to establish which among the vast number of items in the universe is i.

When the particular in question (j) is not contained in the actual world, then the only way to establish every true statement about it by being told that j is qualitatively identical with some particular in our own world (the latter being available for the needed tests) or else if j with the exception of clearly specified couple of properties is qualitatively identical to some actual particular.

The preceding paragraph indicates that the very essence of a physical property P is that when an individual i exemplifies it, i is set apart from every particular not possessing P. We cannot know what something is without knowing how it is marked off from other things. Thus when yet another property Q is ascribed to it, i is set apart from further groups of particulars and hence the set of particulars which contains i keeps narrowing until it whittles down to a set containing nothing but i. Hence the process we have embarked upon and which leads to the individuation of i, placing us in the position to examine i thoroughly, was possible because of the power of every genuine physical property to set i apart from everything in the act world that lacks it. Clearly however 'exist' is fundamentally different from 'blue', 'spherical', 'elastic' and every other genuine predicate in that it has no differentiating power since it applies to every physical individual in our world. Hence 'exists' does not represent an authentic property.

III. NECESSARY EXISTENCE

As is known, Professors Hartshorne[2] and Malcolm[3] have conceded the untenability of the ontological argument's version so far discussed. They concentrated, however, on another version which they regarded as valid. The

[2] *Man's Vision of God* (Harper & Row, 1941).
[3] 'Anselm's Ontological Argument', *Philosophical Review*, 1960, pp. 41–62

argument these two philosophers defended made use not of mere existence, but of necessary existence, which they believed to be a perfection-making-attribute.

The validity of this version has also been queried. Jonathan Bennett has claimed that there is no other way of understanding the assertion that a thing exists necessarily, but by interpreting it to mean that it is a thing that exists by definition, and such an interpretation is untenable.[4] However, Alvin Plantinga has offered an explication of 'necessary existence' not in terms of 'existence by definition' but in a manner that it escapes altogether Bennett's objection. Plantinga says:

Take a world like x and consider two things, A and B that exist in it, where A exists not only in x but in every other world as well, while B exists in some, but not all worlds. According to the doctrine under consideration A is so far forth greater in x than B is.[5]

Plantinga adds that this does not mean that if B has a great number of precious qualities all of which A lacks, then the mere fact that A exists necessarily, raises A to a level more exalted than that of B. Necessary existence is only one important element of perfection which in combination with all perfection-making-qualities is capable of rendering the particular exemplifying it a being greater than which is inconceivable.

It seems that Plantinga could have defended his point, which is to play the most vital part in his approach, far better than this. Suppose a jeweller has two of the largest, most brilliant, most perfectly shaped precious stones, A and B, which are also virtually indistinguishable from one another. Many rich people are willing to pay ten million dollars for either stone. I do not believe that even if all the logicians in the world testified that while A existed in this world only, B existed in every possible world that would induce any prospective buyer to pay one dime more for B than for A. Indeed it would be very hard to figure out simply what the logicians were saying. Thus there are many contexts in which ascription of necessary existence so far from elevating its possessor, fails altogether to make sense.

But a more damaging example which indicates that 'necessary existence' is often a status lowering rather than status raising predicate is provided by negative predicates.

Consider the negative predicate 'non-penguin' which applies to any animal (except to a penguin), vegetable, and mineral as well as to every abstract particular. It is clearly impossible to think of a world in which a 'non-penguin' fails to apply to anything. Even if we may coherently speak of a world which contains absolutely nothing but a single penguin, it will have to be a world which contains a beak, a leg and other parts of that bird which

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[4] 'Kant, Malcolm and the Ontological Argument', in (ed.) R. I. G. Hughes. *A Philosophical Companion to First-Order Logic* (Hackett Pub. Co., 1993), pp. 131–3.
[5] *The Nature Of Logical Necessity* (Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 212

are themselves non-penguins. In addition the spatial region occupied by a penguin is a non-penguin as well as all the *events* taking place there.

In fact it is the very definition of a negative predicate that unlike positive predicates, it has application in every possible world. Unquestionably, every positive property P is immensely superior to its negative counterpart $\sim$ P. Given that i is a penguin we know indefinitely many true statement referring to i: (1) i is smaller than an average battleship, (2) is larger than a flea, (3) is an able swimmer, (4) found in large group in the antarctic, and so on.

On the other hand, given that j is a non-penguin we do not know whether any of the above four statements are true or false when j is substituted for i. Indeed all we know that it is not a penguin but have no clue as to whether j is soluble in water, is a battle or an operatic aria, etc.

Thus given that Π is any one of the indefinitely many negative predicates, 'A particular of which Π may be predicated, exists' is a necessarily true statement since it is true in every possible world. Conceivably, one might object that, while regardless where it is asserted 'A superexcellent being exists', always refers to the same being, 'A particular of which Π may be predicated exists' refers in each world to a different particular. To this one may reply that of space itself we may predicate Π in every possible world and by the doctrine of transworld identity the second statement also refers invariably to the same thing. Thus seeing that existence in every possible world may be a manifestation of weakness, Plantinga should have been more guarded and maintain that *under special conditions* necessary existence contributes to the excellence of its possessor.

And indeed at this point Plantinga would have an excellent way of defending his thesis, a way different from the one he has chosen. Plantinga could have conceded that there are contexts in which necessary existence is a sign of weakness, and others in which the concept makes no sense; however in the context of an absolutely superior being necessary existence is simply indispensable. For suppose that there existed merely a single possible world W* from which God was absent. Then it would no longer be true that He possessed all the properties that superexcellence implied. A being greater than which is really inconceivable is the sustainer of everything and without whom not a blade of grass could exist for a moment, let alone an entire universe like W*.

Let us look at Plantinga's next step in developing his argument which is to suggest that it is at least possible that such a being exists. But then there is a modal principle that a proposition which is possibly necessary, is necessary. Thus given that the statement 'A maximally perfect (necessary) being exists' is possibly true, it follows that the statement is necessarily true. Consequently it is true in every world including our own.

It might seem that the only way to defeat this argument would be to refuse to concede that the statement in question is possibly true. Does, however,

seem plausible to suppose that the statement 'A maximally perfect being necessarily exist', in the sense the way it has just been explicated, is a downright contradiction, or that the concept of superexcellence passes human undertanding?

IV. WORLDS INCOMPATIBLE WITH THE DIVINE SCHEME

At a closer look, we are bound to discover a genuinely compelling reason why existence in every logically possible world is particularly intolerable in a theological context.

Virtually all theists would agree that our world is not the outcome an arbitrary, capricious act of God. The act of creation was intended to implement a Divine scheme and consequently our world was bound to be endowed with features without which reality would be devoid of genuine significance. The 18th century scholar M. Bennett stated what I believe is hardly disputed by any traditional theist:

The entire world was created for man.[6]

Similarly in a 13th century classic we read:

Surely God created nothing whereof He has no need.[7]

Traditional theists tend to agree that part of the Divine plan is to have sentient beings who are capable, to a sufficient degree, of understanding the nature of the Divine, and may be inspired to live a God-centred life. Most theists would deny the possibility of a world which lacked the facilities required for the realization of the Creator's specific objectives. Needless to say, they would proclaim even more resolutely the inconceivability of a world possessing features positively frustrating anything that could serve a religious purpose.

It has often been emphasized that the most fundamental difference between pagan gods and the theist's God is that the former have unfulfilled desires and their worshippers are capable of contributing to these; that pagan gods can be appeased and their wrath turned away by those who please them sufficiently. The theist's God on the other hand lacks nothing (the act of gloryfying Him and offering petitionary prayers as well as sacrifices is to benefit the worhipper and not Him) and all His acts are outer directed and everything He does or instructs us to do is a manifestation of His benevolence. Thus the aim in creating the world was to have agents who are equipped with the power to comprehend the distinction between good and bad and have the power to choose the former, thereby elevate themselves spiritually, drawing closer to the Divine.

More specifically, theologians agree that a world in which no virtuous

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[6] *Magen Avoth*, cited in R. Alkalay, *Words For The Wise* (Massada, 1970).
[7] *Zohar* on *Genesis*.

response to suffering could take place, and in which there was no scope for charity or for any compassionate act or even merely compassionate sentiments and in which sentient beings were provided with no opportunity to grow religiously, to engage in any pious act or thought is devoid of any divinely desirable features and God's benevolence would prevent Him from creating such a world. It follows therefore, that, for instance, a world in which every sentient being was extremely cruel, and incapable of anything but to engage constantly in wicked acts, or in which no sentient beings existed at all, was not the kind of world which exemplified any spiritually essential features. Hence it is out of the question that God would create such a world. Thus while not logically impossible, that kind of world may be said to be theologically impossible. Furthermore, it may be added that God is unable to create theologically impossible worlds, and that, since the source of His inability is benevolence which is incompatible with any Divine act being other than good, this inability places no constraints on His limitless power.

I am aware of course that there is hardly a single statement about which all theists would agree. Also it is clear that it is futile to attempt to speculate about what may or may not be a part of divine design. Still even among these more hesitant theists there will be very few who would reject even the following reduced claim:

> Suppose, say, that the world were so organized that every sentient being suffers agonizing pain without respite from the first moment of existence. Could anybody seriously entertain the idea that this sort of universe would not render the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent creator so improbable as not to be worth considering.[8]

It would make hardly any sense if anyone professed to believe in a perfectly good and powerful being and yet refused to concede this minimal claim.

Clearly then, some worlds are logically impossible because they do not lend themselves to a coherent description; others are physically impossible since they permit the violation of laws governing nature in the actual world. Now we have drawn attention to theologically impossible worlds which have features that would frustrate Divine objectives. According to the theist, some worlds permitted by logic are theologically impossible, and consequently do not merely fail to be actual; they *could not* be actual, as nothing could possibly exist except if willed by God. And just as God's presence does not grace logically impossible worlds, it does not grace theologically impossible worlds either. It has become clear therefore that Divine perfection, far from requiring that He exists in every world which logicians call a 'possible world', in fact demands that He be absent in every world in which Divine objectives are unattainable.

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[8] J. M. McGrath, 'Is The Problem of Evil Misconceived?' *Religious Studies*, 30, 1994, pp. 305–10.

V. ONE OF THE MOST FASCINATING ASPECTS OF THE UNIVERSE

Conceivably, some could object by claiming that there is clear enough evidence that God *may* permit states of affairs which are of no divine significance. They could argue that even those who regard it as highly probable that in the actual world there are some other places beside our solar system where life exists, admit the existence of billions of stars with solar systems that are completely barren, containing nothing apart from inanimate matter. And, of course, the incredibly vast amount of interstellar and intergalactic space is virtually certain to be devoid of all life. It follows then, that considerably more than 99% of available space in our universe offers no scope for Divinely desirable processes to take place, and yet such vast regions *actually* exist. Why then should a world be impossible in which 100% of the available space is spiritually barren?

It is essential that we address ourselves to this objection. As a preliminary, let us remind ourselves, that many of those who have been so strongly impressed by natural phenomena as to see a 'Superintelligent designer' behind it, did so not merely because of the immensity of the universe and the inexhaustible variety it presents us with, but because of the amount of ingenuity that was assumed to lie beneath it.

Brute force alone is not especially admirable. To be able to build huge pyramids by making use of the physical exertions of hundreds of thousands of slaves is not that impressive. We would however be full of admiration if a single person had built them through the work of a simple machine of his own invention. Similarly, what strikes many as the truly fascinating feature of the universe, a feature that becomes more and more evident with the progress of science, is the fabulous economy with which it has been constructed, for it seems to be the result of a process in which a maximal end has been achieved through minimal means; in which a gigantic system was produced through relatively infinitesimal expenditure (in terms of initial conditions and the laws governing them)! Leading contemporary scientists go as a far as to speculate that there may exist a *single* ultimate law of physics underlying all matter and forces, all subatomic, microscopic as well as all macroscopic elements, compounds, organic systems, including human bodies. Paul Davies in several of his books emphasizes the incredible amount of fine tuning required among the constants of nature so that early existent, simple elementary particles should possess the power of self organization through which exceedingly complex systems, such as stars, planets, the earth and finally the earth's inhabitants come into being. Davies concludes his paper 'The Mind of God'[9], by saying:

Freeman Dyson once wrote…'I do not feel like an alien in this universe. The more I examine the universe and study the details of its architecture, the more

[9] In Jan Hilgevoord (ed.) *Physics and Our View of the World* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 238.

evidence I find that the universe in some sense must have known that we are coming.'
I feel the same way too. In some strange and perhaps unfathomable manner, it
begins to look as if we were meant to be here.

On this approach, the colossal stretches of lifeless parts of our universe no
longer appear as devoid of divine significance: they are essential elements in
the awe-inspiring process to which we owe our existence. To get a process
going which starts with almost nothing, i.e. with a few submicroscopic
elements with a minimal number of properties, and ends up with a solar
system capable of sustaining human life, and at the same time ensure that
everything has been provided for from the beginning, without requiring any
repair work, occasional boosting or any other kind of interference, entails a
lengthy business with intermediate stages at which atoms, molecules and
increasingly more complex elements emerged, and eventually we ourselves
were able to come along. There are no solid grounds for claiming that it
would have been logically possible to have a process with a similar degree of
economy which could produce a comparably immense and complex system
through such a sparing initial investment without also generating a consider-
able amount of theologically useless by-products. The inevitable 'debris' do
therefore not weaken the manifestation of Divine perfection which we are
bound to appreciate through an awareness of the way in which through the
fewest means such a bedazzlingly rich universe has arisen.

  No similar argument is available for justifying the possibility of entire
worlds devoid of any theistically redeeming feature, let alone worlds having
features that are abhorrent from a divine point of view.

VI. DIFFICULTIES WITH THE NOTION OF NECESSITY

We are thus back again facing the difficulty of reconciling necessary existence
with Divine perfection. An immediate response might consist in an attempt
to define the notion of 'necessity' in the present context in some other way
which does not make use of the notion of 'possible worlds'. I shall indicate
very briefly the difficulties such an attempt would have to face. I do not
think 'logical necessity' is a likely candidate. Nor is conceptual necessity, in
the sense that the denial of God's existence is unintelligible, like the statement
'X is red but colourless'. Another attempt might consist in equating 'x exists
necessarily' with 'x's non-existence is inconceivable' But then the term
'inconceivable' would require elucidation. If one means 'unimaginable'
then it is not correctly applied here since many will readily claim the
psychological skill to imagine the world to be as claimed by atheists to be.
And in any case psychological inabilities are not reliable grounds for on-
tological claims. One might explore the possibility of explicating Divine
existence as necessary in the sense that He is absolutely independent in origin
from every thing else, and nothing exists that was not created and kept being

sustained by Him. But this line of approach confers only causal necessity on God. And of course to suggest that the necessity in question is provided by definition, is untenable as long as 'necessity' itself has not been provided with a definition.

VII. THEOLOGICALLY POSSIBLE WORLDS

Let us now consider an argument which in someways sharply deviates from the traditional versions of the ontological argument. So far it has become evident that neither 'existence in our world alone' nor 'existence in every world' is a predicate whose referent minimally satisfies the demand to characterize the particular exemplifying it. The first predicate does not provide the possibility of setting its referent apart from any other existing thing and thus fails to contribute one iota to its individuation. And in view of the fact that necessary predicates – in the sense that they apply to every thing – also fail to characterize since there is nothing to which they do not apply; thus their referents do not set apart the particulars exemplifying them. However, we may succeed in ascribing a genuine property to an individual without mentioning any of the synonyms commonly used to represent that property, but through ascribing existence to it in a selected set of worlds and excluding it from all others. Moreover, we may even succeed in ascribing a fully individuating property in this manner.

Consider for instance the individual c where,

$c =_{df}$ The one and only individual who is capable of conversing with every individual who speaks any language.

The above definition uses common predicates. However, we may define c purely in terms of existence in selected worlds:

c exists in every world in which he understands any language spoken in that world. c exists in no other.

I believe it needs no further elaboration to convince the reader that a being may be individuated partially through standard predicates and for the rest through its existence in selected worlds. Let us then denote by Σ all the perfection making properties except ϕ, where

$\phi =_{df}$ Exists in all theologically possible worlds and in none other.

Recall a world is theologically possible if its existence is compatible with divine plans.

Now we are but a step away from completing our argument. First we shall consider the way Leibnizians would continue from here.

According to Leibniz ours is the best of all possible worlds. I believe Leibniz's is a reasonable position for a theist to take.

I regret, that in the distant past I have advanced an argument which

appeared to some as if I thought otherwise. I was sorry to see that in a recent issue of *Religious Studies*, Robert Elliot ascribes to me the absurd view that from a divine point of view any world is as good as any other, and thus 'no matter which world God creates, God may create any world at all.'[10]

In reality, however, all I have suggested (and since then I have stressed again and again giving a variety of reasons on several occasions) is that the world cannot be the best in every respect since certain features of the world have no intrinsic maxima. On the other hand, it is hard to think of any reason why an omnibenevolent being who lacks no power should deny any genuine benefit permitted by logic.[11]

Before coming to the final point let me mention an objection voiced occasionally against Leibniz. It is conceivable that among the infinitely many possible worlds there should be two, W and W′, *of precisely equal degree of divine desirability and both* of them being superior to every other world. Would God not face then an intractable problem that there would be no sufficient reason to prefer W to W′, and vice versa, and hence He would act without sufficient reason if He created one and not the other? On the other hand, to refrain from creating anything so as to prevent the violation of the principle of sufficient reason would be highly unsatisfactory: The whole notion of divine benevolence would then become vacuous as nothing would exist on which to exercise it.

Thus the only alternative remaining is to create both W and W′. However, Leibniz talks about '*the* best of all possible worlds'

Does he have an argument that two equally precious worlds superior to all others is simply not possible? He could have one. If there were two such worlds then one may say one of two things: (1) W and W′ are qulitatively identical and numerically distinct; (2) W and W′ are identically precious but for different reasons. Thus they are not qualitatively identical.

Now (1) is simply out of the question. We can talk about two qualitatively identical Taj Mahals which are nevertheless numerically distinct since they are discernible by virtue of the fact that one exists in India the other in another galaxy, or though they have both been built on the same site, the first has been destroyed a million years ago. Finally their numerical distinctiveness arises from the fact that they are located in different worlds. But surely, if W and W′ are qualitatively identical (since different worlds are not supposed to be embedded in some meta space-time) there is nothing to separate them. Hence the notion of qualitatively identical yet numerically distinct worlds makes no sense. Should on the other hand (2) be the case, then since W and W′ are desirable to different degrees then Leibniz may believe that inevitably W and W′ differ in the properties they exemplify, i.e.

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[10] 'Divine Perfection, Axiology And The No Best World Defense', *Religious Studies*, 29, (1993), pp. 533–42.　[11] *New Perspectives on Old-Time Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1989), Ch. 3.

W had and W′ lacked property P. In that case an omniscient being may be assumed to find some non-theological reason (e.g. aesthetic) why to prefer W to W′. In that case an omniscient Creator is bound to deem the having of P as sufficient reason to create W rather than W′.

A version of the ontological argument based on Lebniz's position would run as follows:

> The concept of G (a being greater than which is inconceivable), is coherent. Surely a being having the attributes Σ & φ is greater than one having Σ only. Consequently, G must exemplify Σ & φ.

However according to Leibniz there is but a single world that is theologically possible. Consequently, the one and only one world which is the actual is in the one in which God exists.

And what if the truth is for whatever reason that there are several TPWs (theologically possible worlds)? It still remains the case that our world is a member of that set: God does not permit any world outside that set to actualize, and we are actual. Are we then committed to saying that every world belonging to the set of TPWS is ipso facto real? Not necessarily. The claim that some or almost all TPWs are unrealized is compatible with the view defended here. The crucial point is that our world is one in which God exists and is actual.

Thus on the last view there is a set of logically possible worlds, and all the worlds that may coherently described belong to it. That set has a proper subset of theologically possible worlds. Any world outside that subset may be logically possible; however, according to the theist if it is divinely abhorrent it is for that reason prevented from actualizing.

There may of course be several other objections not touched upon in this paper. However, I believe that the heaviest indictment of every possible variation on the ontological argument, based on the charge that existence or necessary existence has in one way or another been misused, has fully been met by the version advanced in this paper.[12]