

# OF THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF AN ONTOLOGICAL PROOF FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

By Immanuel Kant  
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Philosophers have always talked of an absolutely necessary being, and have nevertheless declined to take the trouble of conceiving whether—and how—a being of this nature is even conceivable, not to mention that its existence is actually demonstrable. A verbal definition of the concept is certainly easy enough: it is something the non-existence of which is impossible. But does this definition throw any light upon the conditions which render it impossible to conceive of the non-existence of a thing—conditions which we wish to ascertain, that we may discover whether we think anything in the concept of such a being or not? For the mere fact that I throw away, by means of the word unconditioned, all the conditions which the understanding habitually requires in order to regard anything as necessary, is very far from making clear whether by means of the concept of the unconditionally necessary I think of something, or really of nothing at all.

Nay, more, this chance-conception, now become so current, many have endeavored to explain by examples which seemed to render any inquiries regarding its intelligibility quite needless. Every geometrical proposition—a triangle has three angles—it was said, is absolutely necessary; and thus people talked of an object which lay out of the sphere of our understanding as if it were perfectly plain what the concept of such a being meant.

All the examples adduced have been drawn, without exception, from judgments, and not from things. But the unconditioned necessity of a judgment does not form the absolute necessity of a thing. On the contrary, the absolute necessity of a judgment is only a conditioned necessity of a thing, or of the predicate in a judgment. The proposition above-mentioned does not assert that three angles necessarily exist, but, upon condition that a triangle exists, three angles must necessarily exist in it. And thus this logical necessity has been the source of the greatest delusions. Having formed an a priori concept of a thing, the content of which includes existence, we believed ourselves safe in concluding that, because existence belongs necessarily to the object of the concept (that is, under the condition of my positing the existence of this concept as given), the existence of the thing is also posited necessarily, and that it is therefore absolutely necessary—merely because its existence is thought to be included in the conception.

If, in an identical judgment, I annihilate the predicate in thought, and retain the subject, a contradiction is the result; and hence I say, the former belongs necessarily to the latter. But if I suppress both subject and predicate in thought, no contradiction arises; for there is nothing at all, and therefore no means of forming a contradiction. To suppose the existence of a triangle and not that of its three angles, is self-contradictory; but to suppose the non-existence of both triangle and angles is perfectly admissible. And so is it with the concept of an absolutely necessary being. Annihilate its existence in thought, and you annihilate the thing itself with all its predicates; how then can there be any room for contradiction? Externally, there is nothing to give rise to a contradiction, for a thing cannot be necessary externally; nor internally, for, by the annihilation or suppression of the thing itself, its internal properties are also annihilated. God is omnipotent—that is a necessary judgment. His omnipotence cannot be denied, if the existence of a Deity is posited—the existence, that is, of an infinite being, the two concepts being identical. But when you say, God does not exist, neither omnipotence nor any other predicate is affirmed; they must all disappear with the subject, and in this judgment there cannot exist the least self-contradiction.

You have thus seen that when the predicate of a judgment is annihilated in thought along with the subject, no internal contradiction can arise, be the predicate what it may. There is no possibility of evading the conclusion—you find yourselves compelled to declare: There are certain subjects which cannot be annihilated in thought. But this is nothing more than saying: There exist subjects which are absolutely necessary—the very hypothesis which you are called upon to establish. For I find myself unable to form the slightest concept of a thing which when annihilated in thought with all its predicates, leaves behind a contradiction; and contradiction is the only criterion of impossibility in the sphere of pure a priori concepts.

Against these general considerations, the justice of which no one can dispute, one argument is adduced, which is regarded as furnishing a satisfactory demonstration from the fact. It is affirmed that there is one and only one concept, in which the non-being or annihilation of the object is self-contradictory, and this is the concept of a most real being. It possesses, you say, all reality, and you feel yourselves justified in admitting the possibility of such a being. (This I am willing to grant for the present, although the existence of a concept which is not self-contradictory is far from being sufficient to prove the possibility of an object.)\* Now the notion of all reality embraces in it that of existence; the notion of existence lies, therefore, in the concept of this possible thing. If this thing is annihilated in thought, the internal possibility of the thing is also annihilated, which is self-contradictory.

\*A concept is always possible, if it is not self-contradictory. This is the logical criterion of possibility, distinguishing the object of such a conception from the “negative nothing”. But it may be, notwithstanding, an empty conception, unless the objective reality of this synthesis, but which it is generated, is demonstrated; and a proof of this kind must be based upon principles of possible experience, and not upon the principle of analysis or contradiction. This is a warning against inferring from the possibility of a concept (logical possibility) to the possibility of a thing (real possibility).

I answer: It is absurd to introduce—under whatever term disguised—into the concept of a thing, which is to be thought of solely in reference to its possibility, the concept of its existence. If this is admitted, you will have apparently gained the day, but in reality have asserted nothing but a mere tautology. I ask, is the proposition, **this or that thing** (which I am admitting to be possible) **exists**, an analytic or a synthetic proposition? If the former, there is no addition made to the subject of your thought by the affirmation of its existence; but then the concept in your minds is identical with the thing itself, or you have supposed the existence of a thing to be possible, and then inferred its existence from its internal possibility—which is but a miserable tautology. The word “reality” in the concept of the thing, and the word “existence” in the concept of the predicate, will not help you out of the difficulty. For, if you call all positing of a thing “reality”, then you have thereby posited the thing with all its predicates in the conception of the subject and assumed its actual existence, and you merely repeat this in the predicate. But if you confess, as every reasonable person must, that every existential proposition is synthetic, how can it be maintained that the predicate of existence cannot be denied without contradiction?—a property which is the characteristic of analytic propositions, alone.

I should have a reasonable hope of putting an end for ever to this sophistical mode of argumentation, by a strict definition of the concept of existence, did not my own experience teach me that the illusion arising from our confounding a logical with a real predicate (a predicate which aids in the determination of a thing) resists almost all the endeavors of explanation and illustration. A logical predicate may be what you please, even the subject may be predicated of itself; for logic pays no regard to the content of a judgment. But the determination of a concept is a predicate, which adds to and enlarges the concept. It must not, therefore, be contained in the concept.

Being is evidently not a real predicate, that is, a concept of something which is added to the concept of some other thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations in it. Logically, it is merely the copula of a judgment. The proposition, God is omnipotent, contains two concepts, which have a certain object or content; the word "is" is no additional predicate—it merely indicates the relation of the predicate to the subject. Now, if I take the subject (God) with all its predicates (omnipotence being one), and say: "God is," or, "There is a God," I add no new predicate to the concept of God, I merely posit or affirm the existence of the subject with all its predicates—I posit the object in relation to my concept. The content of both is the same; and there is no addition made to the concept, which expresses merely the possibility of the object, by my act of conceiving of the object—in the expression, "It is"—as absolutely given or existing. Thus the real contains no more than the possible. A hundred real dollars contain no more than a hundred possible dollars. For, as the latter indicate the concept, and the former the object, on the supposition that the content of the former was greater than that of the latter, my concept would not be an expression of the whole object, and would consequently be an inadequate concept of it. But in reckoning my wealth there may be said to be more in a hundred real dollars than in a hundred possible dollars—that is, in the mere concept of them. For the real object—the dollars—is not analytically contained in my concept, but forms a synthetic addition to my concept (which is merely a determination of my mental state), although this objective reality—this existence—apart from my concepts, does not in the least degree increase the aforesaid hundred dollars.

By whatever and by whatever number of predicates—even to the complete determination of it—I may conceive of a thing, I do not in the least augment the object of my concept by the addition of the statement: "This thing exists." Otherwise, not exactly the same, but something more than what was thought of in my concept, would exist, and I could not affirm that the exact object of my concept had real existence. If I think of a thing as containing all modes of reality except one, the mode of reality which is absent is not added to the concept of the thing by the affirmation that the thing exists; on the contrary, the thing exists—if it exist at all—with the same defect as that thought of in its concept; otherwise not that which was thought of, but something different, exists. Now, if I think of a being that is the highest reality, without defect or imperfection, the question still remains—whether this being exists or not? For, although no element is wanting in the possible real content of my concept, there is a defect in its relation to my mental state, that is, I am ignorant whether the cognition of the object indicated by the concept is possible a posteriori. And here the cause of the present difficulty becomes apparent. If the question regarded an

object of sense merely, it would be impossible for me to confound the concept with the existence of a thing. For the concept merely enables me to think of an object as according with the general conditions of experience; while the existence of the object permits me to think of it as contained in the sphere of actual experience. At the same time, this connection with the world of experience does not in the least augment the concept, although a possible perception has been added to the experience of the mind. But if we conceive of existence by the pure category alone, it is not to be wondered at, that we should find ourselves unable to present any criterion sufficient to distinguish it from mere possibility.

Whatever be the content of our concept of an object, it is necessary to go beyond it, if we wish to predicate existence of the object. In the case of sensuous objects, this is attained by their connection according to empirical laws with some one of my perceptions; but there is no means of cognizing the existence of objects of pure thought, because it must be cognized completely a priori. But all our knowledge of existence (be it immediately by perception, or by inferences connecting some object with a perception) belongs entirely to the sphere of experience—which is in perfect unity with itself; and although an existence out of this sphere cannot be absolutely declared to be impossible, it is a hypothesis the truth of which we have no means of ascertaining.

The notion of a Supreme Being is in many respects a highly useful idea; but for the very reason that it is an idea, it is incapable of enlarging our cognition with regard to the existence of things. It is not even sufficient to instruct us as to the possibility of a being which we do not know to exist. The analytical criterion of possibility, which consists in the absence of contradiction in propositions, cannot be denied it. But the connection of real properties in a thing is a synthesis of the possibility of which an a priori judgment cannot be formed, because these realities are not presented to us specifically; and even if this were to happen, a judgment would still be impossible, because the criterion of the possibility of synthetic cognitions must be sought for in the world of experience, to which the object of an idea cannot belong. And thus the celebrated Leibniz has utterly failed in his attempt to establish upon a priori grounds the possibility of this sublime ideal being.

The celebrated ontological or Cartesian argument for the existence of a Supreme Being is therefore insufficient; and we may as well hope to increase our stock of knowledge by the aid of mere ideas, as the merchant to augment his wealth by the addition of zeros to his cash account.