**Kant’s Critique of the Ontological Argument: FAIL**

However much we may profess to admire the genius of Kant, one area in which he generally receives low marks is in his philosophical arguments for his views. Even the most sympathetic critics find it impossible to present his reasoning on any topic as both valid and relevant to the issue at hand. Reconstructions that make his arguments valid inevitably prove to be inadequate to the dialectical weight they are intended to carry, whereas reconstructions that do lead the indicated conclusion inevitably turn out to be fallacious. Those that claim to have achieved both inevitably prove to be as unintelligible as the texts they are intended to explicate.[[1]](#footnote-1) For this reason, one often comes away with the impression that Kant tended to arrive at his positive views first, and only then attempted to find arguments to justify those positive views after the fact. While this is not always an illegitimate procedure, in Kant’s case it appears to be a formula for disaster. It remains that there is not a single major argument in Kant’s *corpus* that philosophers agree is both cogent and plausible. The continued fascination with Kant’s theoretical philosophy seems to be motivated primarily by the audacity of its claims and the novelty of its approach rather than the cogency of his reasoning, though there are no lack of scholars who are still hopeful of finding a hermeneutical magic key that will unravel the Gordian knot of his thought.

There is, however, one exception to the usual gloomy assessment of Kant’s dialectical competence: his critique of the ontological argument. For Kant, the critique of the ontological argument holds a central place in the destructive project of his philosophy of religion. He treats the ontological argument, not as a strange or curious attempt to define God into existence, but instead as the central argument for God’s existence upon which the Cosmological and Teleological arguments absolutely depend for their cogency. The critique of the ontological argument, then, is the linchpin in Kant’s critique of traditional philosophical theology and metaphysics. Since many philosophers share Kant’s general antipathy toward religion outside of the bounds of morality alone, Kant’s critique of the ontological argument usually receives high marks from the critics and is seen as being entirely successful in its aims, even “earthshaking” in its consequences. Sadly, I do not share this view and think Kant’s reasoning in this context is no better than that he employs anywhere else in his theoretical corpus. Of course, it is not just enough to say this; one must say why one has reached this assessment. That is what I will do in this essay.

**Kant’s Critique of the Ontological Argument** The classic ontological argument as we encounter it in Anselm, Descartes, and the Leibnizian tradition is an attempt to prove God’s existence using what today we would call conceptual analysis. God is (plausibly) defined as a being a greater than which none other can be conceived, a being possessing all perfections, or as the *ens realissimum* (“the most real being”). The proof then proceeds by employing two assumptions: first, that whatever is coherently conceivable is possible, and second, that whatever is conceptually necessary is logically necessary. Since the concept of God, unlike that of a square circle or something older than itself, is apparently conceivable without contradiction, the proponent of the argument takes it to be the case that God, unlike a square circle or something older than itself, is a possible being. The proponent of the argument then proceeds to show that the concept of God contains the concept of existence as one of its essential elements or features, thus that “God exists” is conceptually necessary. The proponent uses various grounds depending on the version of the argument in question. For Anselm, a contingent God would lack the epitome of perfection required of a being a greater than which cannot be thought, so that only a being that exists necessarily could count as such a being. For Descartes, for God to exist in such a way that His non-existence is impossible is a perfection. As such, to exist belongs to God’s essence, and thus to the concept of God just as to have three sides belongs to the concept of triangle. For the same reason, so does necessary existence. For the Leibnizian, all that needs to be added to the foregoing is a proof that God is a possible being. This Leibniz supplies in his “Two Notations for Discussion with Spinoza,” where he defines a perfection to be any simple, purely positive property existing without limitation in a subject. Since we could show that two perfections are *incompossible* (cannot be instantiated together in a single subject) only by showing that they are incompatible with one another, and this in turn only by showing that there is some sort of contradiction in their being instantiated in the same subject, no such contradiction can be demonstrated. That is apparently because this would require an analysis of these perfections capable of showing them to be incompatible with each other, but being simple, no such analysis is possible in their case. Therefore, since it cannot be shown, in principle, that it is impossible for such a being to exist, and therefore that its non-existence is logically necessary, we can conclude that its existence is possible after all.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is the ontological argument as it was known to Kant, and which he proposes to refute in the *Beweisgrund*, on essentially the same basis that he presents later in the First *Critique*.[[3]](#footnote-3) “Existence,” he contends, is not a predicate, and thus not the name of a property that can add to the perfection of a thing. It is not possible, then, to analyze the concept of existence out of the concept of God, or out of the concept of anything that might possibly exist. The notion of existence adds nothing, says Kant, to the concept of a thing; as such, conceptual analysis can never establish the existence of any object. That is Kant’s claim in the *Beweisgrund*. What his *argument* for this claim might be is, as so often in Kant, difficult to state with precision and plausibility, and is to be found (such as it is) mostly in the First *Critique*.[[4]](#footnote-4) As is his wont, Kant presents a battery of considerations, all of which fall short of establishing the claim in the form he needs in order to enforce “the impossibility of an ontological proof.”

His first consideration is a retread of a familiar claim one finds in the mouths of opponents of the ontological argument. “The unconditioned necessity of judgments,” he says, “is not the same as an absolute necessity of things.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This is reminiscent of similar statements made by Aquinas and Hume. Aquinas dismisses Anselm’s proof in a single line, in which he contends that what holds of the conceptual order need not hold of the order of real things.[[6]](#footnote-6) For Hume, the ontological argument is a complete non-starter and he does not even discuss it as such. However, in a discussion of the possibility of a proof of God’s existence, Hume claims that the very idea of such a proof is stillborn, since whatever we can conceive to exist we can also conceive to be non-existent, so that no demonstration of the existence of any being is possible in principle.[[7]](#footnote-7) If any of these claims holds water, then of course no ontological argument can proceed to its conclusion. However, the obvious problem with these dismissive (and ultimately light-minded) criticisms is that they simply beg the question against the argument. For precisely what the proponent of the ontological argument is claiming is that, in the case of at least one concept, that of God, these claims are demonstrably false on conceptual grounds alone and that he or she has an argument to prove this. The critic, in effect, says that even if the proponent has a valid and sound deductive proof from conceptual truths with the conclusion “God exists,” we need not take the proof seriously or even examine it. However, we can only know that these claims are true if we have examined the proof and found it wanting on independent grounds. We cannot thus appeal to these claims in order to justify dismissing the proof without a hearing; to do so is to beg the question.

In addition, we may note that the claim that what holds of the conceptual order need not hold of the order of real things is clearly and obviously false. Aquinas would hardly say this about, say, the principle of contradiction, asserting that while we cannot conceive of (e.g.) of a square circle, it does not follow that square circles cannot exist in reality.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, unless Aquinas is willing to go this far, then he cannot exclude the possibility that conceptual truths can entail substantive existential claims. More than this, it seems obviously true that it actually is the case that we can infer substantive existential claims from conceptual truths. From the fact that the notion of a square circle or of something older or taller than itself is self-contradictory, we can confidently infer that there are no square circles or things older or taller than themselves. These claims are not merely logical or conceptual truths, but precisely truths about the way the world is. Further, despite the fact that they are substantive existential claims, we know them to be necessarily true, simply because they are entailed by conceptual truths that we grasp with evident certainty. In the same way, the proponent of the ontological argument claims to have a similar conceptual argument for the substantive existential claim “God exists.” The foregoing considerations, then, cannot rule out the possibility of an ontological argument in principle.

Kant’s second criticism concerns the way that existential judgments function. Existential judgments, he contends, differ from predicative judgments, both in their grammatical function and their logical force.[[9]](#footnote-9) According to Kant, the purpose of a predicative judgment is to attribute a property to a subject, whereas the purpose of an existential judgment is to posit the subject along with all of its predicates as real or actual (as Suarez would say) outside of its causes. Conceptual analysis informs us of which of a thing’s predicates are inseparable from its nature. For example, a triangle has three sides and is inconceivable without them, so that it if I posit a triangle without three sides, I fall into a contradiction. However, when I deny that a triangle exists, I deny that thing along with all its predicates, both essential and accidental, simply by refusing to posit that triangle as real.

All of this seems to be in good order, but its application to the case of God is far from clear. The defender of the ontological argument can cheerfully concede that what Kant asserts in the case of the triangle is perfectly sound, but that is because a triangle is a contingent being, one that either might or might not exist and which is thus by nature indifferent to existence. As such, there is no difficulty in refusing to posit it as real, and thus denying it along with all of its predicates. The defender of the ontological argument, however, claims to have proved that God is a necessary being, whose essence includes existence as one of its essential features or elements. There are thus two cases to consider. In the first, we suppose that, in denying that God exists, we are refusing to posit God along with all of His properties, which do not include His existence. Once again, however, this is simply to beg the question against the argument by supposing that existence is not a predicate or a property in the case of God. The defender of the argument has the just protest that he has produced a conceptual analysis of the concept of God from which it follows that existence is one of the essential features or elements of the Divine Essence or Nature. If Kant had already proved that existence is not, or could not be a predicate, then this criticism would have some point; however, this is precisely what the present criticism is supposed to establish. For Kant to suppose that it has already been proved in this context is thus to presume what he is supposed to be proving, and thus to argue in a circle.

The other case to consider would be one in which the critic of the ontological argument concedes that the conceptual analysis of the concept of God presented by the proponent of that argument does entail that existence belongs to the Divine Essence or Nature as one of its essential components. However, he or she refuses to posit that being as real, rejecting it along with all of its properties, including existence. In this case, however, the proponent of the argument will appeal to the conceptual analysis that he or she has given to show that to do this is to fall into a contradiction. Since according to that analysis God is a necessary being, hence not one whose Essence or Nature is indifferent to existence, to refuse to posit God as a real being is to suppose that God is not a necessary being after all, which is contrary to what that analysis entails, and thus to fall into a contradiction. One cannot accept the conceptual analysis offered by the proponent of the argument and then conclude that God is even possibly non-existent. That would be similar to accepting the analysis of triangles according to which all triangles have three sides while at the same time affirming the possibility that two-sided triangles exist. Thus, on the scenario we are now considering, the non-existence of God is excluded in the same way that the existence of two-sided triangles or square circles is excluded, on conceptual grounds alone. Again, if Kant had somehow proved that existence cannot be a predicate/property in the case of God or that conceptual analysis can never entail a substantive existential claim, then this criticism might carry some weight. As it is, it does nothing to aid Kant’s cause.

The same holds for Kant’s final point offered in defense of the claim that existence is not a predicate or a property in the case of God.[[10]](#footnote-10) According to Kant, the notion of existence adds nothing to the concept of a thing by way of increased meaning or information. Thus, the substantive content of my concept of a hundred thalers (which I am imagining to exist in my pocket) is the same whether or not the hundred thalers I am conceiving of actually exist. Certainly, actual existence adds to the reality of what we are conceiving: there is all the difference in the world between an imaginary and a real hundred thalers in my pocket so far as my finances go. However, the difference between a real and a merely imaginary hundred thalers is not a conceptual difference, hence cannot be cashed out in terms of, or as the consequence of, such a difference. The same, it is suggested, will also hold in the case of the concept of God. If so, it cannot be the case that a conceptual analysis of that concept can entail that God actually exists.

This criticism makes no odds, and commits the same error as Kant’s earlier attempts to refute the ontological proof. Certainly, in the case of a contingent being like a supposed hundred thalers in my pocket, the notion of existence adds nothing to the concept of that thing. That is because the hundred thalers in question is a contingent being, whose nature is indifferent to existence and which can thus either exist or fail to exist depending on the circumstances. Since such natures do not contain existence as one of their essential features or elements, the notion of actual existence cannot add to the substantive content of their concepts. However, the proponent of the ontological argument contends that the conceptual analysis of God there presented entails that existence is part of the substantive content of the concept and thus that God is a necessary being. It is precisely this status as necessarily existent that the notion of existence adds to the concept of God, and while it may be a unique feature of this concept, it is by no means trivial. Thus, once again, the supposed analogy miscarries.

To the claim that the concept of God is unique in this respect, Kant responds by claiming “that there is already a contradiction in the introducing of the concept of existence…into the concept of a thing which we profess to be thinking solely in reference to its possibility.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Kant neither explains what this contradiction is nor justifies his claim that the proponent of the ontological argument is simply sneaking the concept of existence into the concept of God, tacking it onto that concept in the same manner that Guanilo tacks the notion of necessary existence onto his factitious notion of a perfect island.[[12]](#footnote-12) Again, the proponent of the ontological argument claims to have analyzed the concept of existence out of that of God as one of its essential elements or features, an analysis that Kant has just finished summarizing and that, despite all his bluff and bluster, has done nothing to undermine or expose as fallacious.

However, he makes one last try, employing the device known as Hume’s fork.[[13]](#footnote-13) Let us ask, he says, whether the claim “God exists” is analytic or synthetic. If it is analytic, the predicate merely repeats part of the meaning of the subject term. In that case, it is a mere tautology, true solely in virtue of relations between ideas or the way we use words, and thus without substantive content or existential entailment. On the other hand, if it is synthetic, then the predicate adds to the meaning of the subject and thus cannot be analyzed out of it as one of its essential elements or features. In that case, it will be substantive, but not knowable except on the basis of experience. Since the latter is not possible in the case of God, the possibilities in this case reduce to the former, and the conclusion of the ontological argument is exposed as a miserable tautology after all.

To see what is wrong with this argument, let us once again consider the case of the square circle. It is evident *a priori* that the notion of a square circle contains a contradiction, not just in my conceiving of it but in the very thing conceived of, and thus that no such thing could exist, even in principle. I therefore confidently infer what I can clearly and distinctly perceive to be entailed by this, i.e. that no square circles exist. Yet now let us ask, is this claim analytic or synthetic? Clearly, the answer is that it is both synthetic, hence true of the world, and also necessary since entailed by the analysis of the concept “square circle.” When I say that no such thing exists, I mean to assert this claim as objectively true. I do not intend merely to report how words are used, nor do I utter a miserable tautology, but instead assert a fact about the world – and not just the world of “experience.” At the same time, I claim to know this substantive truth is true *a priori* through conceptual analysis and in such a way that I can know it with certainty, as I would not if it were based on experience. In so reasoning and for all Kant has said, I commit no fallacy or any other intellectual impropriety when I assert these synthetic claims. The same will hold for my equally confident assertions that nothing can be red all over and green all over at the same time, or that there can be no mountain without a valley, or that nothing can be older or taller than itself, and for countless other cases. If Hume’s fork cannot countenance or explain such cases of knowledge, then that is an obvious *reductio* on Hume’s fork and the epistemology that underwrites it.[[14]](#footnote-14) There is no reason that the same thing cannot be true of the ontological argument, if in fact the conceptual analysis of the concept of God does entail that existence belongs to the Essence or Nature of God and that therefore to conceive of God as non-existent involves a contradiction. In that case, in inferring the substantive, synthetic claim that God exists from that analysis will be no more problematic, or suspect, than inferring that non-existence of square circles from their conceptual impossibility, since on that analysis, the non-existence of God is conceptually impossible in exactly the same way.

**The Quantificational Analysis of “Exists”** In the passage we have just considered, Kant asserts that existence is only a logical, not a real predicate, one that adds no content to the concept of that to which it is applied. In a synthetic predicative judgment, the “is” is merely a *copula*, uniting the subject and the predicate. In the case of an existential statement, the “is” simply posits the subject as the object of its concept, or asserts that the concept is instantiated or exemplified by something real or actual. As such, its entire meaning is exhausted by its syntactic function without the need to attribute any substantive meaning-content to the term. Logically and grammatically considered, then, the “is” of existence has only a syntactic function and is thus a syncategorematic term. On this basis, it is easy to arrive at the belief that it has no substantive or referential meaning.

Kant’s claim that the meaning of an existential claim, i.e., one containing the “is” of existence, is exhausted by the act of positing something as real or actual is often thought to be a precursor of the modern “quantificational” analysis of existence pioneered by Frege and Russell. Indeed, it can even be seen to be a precursor of the ontological relativism of Quine and Goodman, according to which *to be* is to be a bound variable in a quantified expression, and what exists (for us, at least) is a function of what the scientific theories we accept require us to posit as theoretical entities. In fact, as I shall argue in a subsequent paper, Kant has a completely different alternative in mind when he discusses the nature of existence and possibility and their relations to one another. Nevertheless, one might suppose that the quantificational analysis of existence is the best line of defense for the sort of view that Kant appears to be committed to in this section of the First *Critique*. It behooves us, then, to complete our survey of Kant’s criticism of the ontological argument by considering the implications for the modern quantificational analysis for that argument.

The basic outlines of this analysis are familiar to every modern analytic philosopher and can found in any logic textbook. In the mid-nineteenth century, difficulties in the square of opposition spawned the Boolean interpretation of categorical propositions. According to this analysis, universal statements lacked existential import whereas particular statements always possessed existential import. Thus, while a universal statement could only be false if the subject and the predicate terms could not be instantiated in the same subject, a particular proposition could be false not just in that way, but also in virtue of the fact that the class named by its subject term was empty. On this account, then, *All witches are women* would be true (in virtue of the definition of the term “witch”) while *Some witches are women* was not, because there are no witches. This account was universally received among logicians and was incorporated into the new symbolic logic as part of its doctrine of quantification.

According to this doctrine, we express the notion of existence by using a logical operator known as the existential quantifier, used to translate the English phrases “for some x” and “there exists an x.” This symbol – (Ex) – is a syncategorematic logical operator and makes it possible for us to state existential judgments without using a predicate constant to represent being or existence. Thus, if I want to assert that dragons exist, I assert (Ex) Dx, which is translated “There exists an x such that x is a dragon.” If, on the other hand, I wish to deny that dragons exist, I can simply deny that existential claim by asserting –(Ex)Dx, which is read “it is not the case that there exists an x such that x is a dragon. Alternatively, we can create an equivalent form with universal quantification, (x)—Dx, read “for all x, it is not the case that x is a dragon.” This, of course, is very much in the spirit of Kant’s suggestion in the passage we just read. When we assert the existence of something, we are not attributing a predicate to a subject, but instead asserting that the defining characteristics of dragonhood are exemplified or instantiated by something, which is roughly equivalent to Kant’s idea of “positing” something as real or actual outside of its causes. In a famous paper, G. E. Moore argued that this formal analysis also successfully models the way that existential judgments function in ordinary language, noting a number of ways in which what Kant would call existential judgments deviate from ordinary predicative judgments, just as we would expect them to if the modern doctrine was true.[[15]](#footnote-15)

At any event, this modern doctrine has often been applied to the consideration of the ontological argument. Proponents of this analysis claim that the error in this argument resides in its hypostatization of “being” or “existence,” one that treats the existence of a thing as though it were a component, state, property or at any rate some sort of objective fact about a thing or feature of it. In fact, however, the belief that being or existence is a component (etc.) of a thing or things is simply an illusion that modern logical theory dispels and explains away as simply a mistake evoked by the superficial similarities between existential and predicative judgments. Being is not a predicate because it is not a name of any kind, and thus not the name of an objectively constituted feature of things. While I am not sure that Kant would endorse this view, it certainly seems to be in the spirit of what Kant wanted to say about “being,” “existence,” and for that manner “real” and “actual” insofar as these are used as surrogates for “being” and “existence” in the context we just quoted.

These results only follow, however, if the proposed quantificational analysis is in fact correct, which in turn will be case only if every example of an existential judgment is plausibly expressible in its idiom and translatable into its symbolism. This claim, however, is clearly questionable. Consider, for example, the claim that I exist. I clearly judge that this is the case, the judgment in question is clearly an existential judgment, and the judgment is extrinsically certain for me whenever I so much as consider it and thus a true existential judgment. Yet how do I express this judgment in the predicate calculus? Since the personal pronoun “I” (alternately expressible using “me” in one non-technical sense of that term in other contexts) is not a proper name, it cannot be expressed in the idiom of or translated using predicate logic. The quantifier (Ex) will not do the job, because it is merely a logical operator, thus is not a statement and so incapable of having a truth-value. Yet there is no predicate such that I could complete the sense of that sentence in any intelligible way, not even “exists” used as a predicate – “There exists an x such that x exists” makes no sense on the face of it. Clearly, then, “I exist” will not fit the standard model for an existential judgment in modern predicate logic.

One may suggest that there is another way of handling this case within standard predicate logic. This is already to concede my point, since it tacitly admits that my counterexample to the standard analysis represents a genuine exception to it. Still, one might try to offer such an alternative, by using the identity operator with proper names or definite descriptions. One might suggest, for example, that “I exist” can be captured by “(Ex)(x=s),” which is read “There exists an x such that x is identical with Steve Duncan.” Of course, it might be objected to this that I might be an amnesiac, or falsely believe that I am Steve Duncan when I am in fact Napoleon Bonaparte, or for some reason lack a proper name altogether. In response to this, one might suggest “(Ex)(x=(ix)Px)” which could translate (e.g.) “There exists an x such x is identical to the x such that x is the patient in bed 23.” Regardless of what we try, however, propositions of this sort are neither logically equivalent to the claim that I exist nor exhaustive of its substantive meaning content. We can show this in a couple of ways.

First, whenever I assert the claim that I exist it is natural to suppose that I am both aware of and am asserting the same fact about myself on each occasion. Yet it does not follow that I am asserting any of these other claims on each and every occasion I utter “I exist,” and simply a contingent fact if I do. Ordinarily, when I assert the claim that I exist, I could be thought to be asserting that Steve Duncan exists. However, if I have amnesia, when I assert that I exist, clearly I am *not* asserting that Steve Duncan exists. Nor, for that matter, does my asserting the claim that exist amount to my asserting I am identical to the patient in bed 23, even if I am the patient in bed 23 and even if I am aware of this fact. The claim that I exist would be true even if I were not the patient in bed 23, or were mistaken about that fact. If were shown that I was not, in fact in bed 23 but instead in bed 21, that would refute my claim to be identical to the patient in bed 23 but not the claim that I exist. This proves that the two claims are not the same claim and assert different facts about me, even in the case where I am in fact the patient in bed 23.

Another way to see this point is this. In all three of these cases, I utter the same sentence, “I exist” and both intend and succeed in asserting the same proposition on each occasion I utter it. Yet on the proposed analysis, the propositional meaning content of what I am asserting turns out to be a matter of what proper name or definite description applies to me on that occasion, so that the substantive content of the claim “I exist” is entirely hostage to contingent facts about me. This, however, leads to the following difficulty. If I am uttering the same propositional content on each occasion I utter the sentence “I exist,” then it follows that the applicable identity statement containing the *analysans* on each occasion is equivalent to that of each of the others applicable in every other situation. Clearly, however, this is false. “There is exists an x such that x is identical to Steve Duncan” is a different statement from “There exists an x such that x is identical to Napoleon Bonaparte.” Since I cannot be identical to both Steve Duncan and Napoleon Bonaparte unless both of these are the same person – and we have stipulated that they are non-identical – both statements cannot be true, whereas the claim that I exist can be and is true on both envisaged scenarios. These are clearly not semantically equivalent to that proposition. On the other hand, supposing that they were, they would have to be semantically equivalent to each other, which they are not. Neither, then are they semantically equivalent to the claim that I exist.

Indeed, it gets worse. Given the cases discussed in the foregoing paragraph, unless I know these other facts then I do know what I am saying or whether what I am saying is true. In that case, then, I am in fact uttering the same sentence but with entirely different, non-equivalent propositional meaning contents on each of the envisaged occasions. Consequently, when I utter the sentence “I exist” I am in fact positing things of which I may have no knowledge whatever or have no reason to believe are instantiated at all, let alone by myself. In that case, the substantive propositional content of my claim that I exist on any particular occasion could be constituted by facts beyond my ken such that I cannot know that, on those occasions, the claim I exist is true. That, however, is preposterous; I most certainly do know what I am saying and that what I am saying is known to be true by me with extrinsic certainty, regardless of whether I know (or even in the circumstances could know) any of these other facts. This is surely a sufficient reason for thinking that the fact that I exist and the fact that I am identical with Steve Duncan, Napoleon Bonaparte, or the patient in bed 23 (etc.) are distinct and separate facts, both knowable and known by me to be true on entirely different grounds. If that is so, we cannot reduce the notion of existence to any quantificational analysis of that notion, even if we appeal to identity.

Suppose, then, as I have just argued, that I can know that I exist without knowing who I am, or what my name is, or that I am the patient in bed 23. In that case, it is therefore possible in principle for the proposition “I exist” to be true and yet for *any* specific identity statement describing me at that time be false or falsely believed by me. Clearly, then, in knowing that the claim “I exist” is true my knowing this, and my manner of knowing it, do not in any way depend on my knowing any such proposition, or on any such proposition being either true or known to be true by anyone. For example, if I believe that I am Steve Duncan when I am in fact Napoleon Bonaparte, then the first claim, i.e. “I exist” when asserted by me will nevertheless be true while the second (which I also assert and believe to be true) is false. Equivalent statements, however, can never have different truth-values. The claim that I exist therefore asserts something more than, and different from, anything that can be captured by the suggested analyses that try to reduce the notion of existence to syncategorematic elements of propositional logic.

This result will hold even if, in every case, there is some statement of this sort that someone could know expressible in the idiom of, and translatable into, predicate logic that would correspond to it on those analyses that could, in principle, be known by someone. Whatever the connection between the claim “I exist” and these other statements may be, it cannot be a logical, semantic, or grammatical one, i.e. a relation of *meaning*. The claim that I exist therefore asserts something more than, and different from, anything that can be captured by predicate logic and this will hold even if, in every case, there is some statement of this sort that someone could know expressible in the idiom of, and translatable into, predicate logic that would correspond to it. If it were, I could not know the one proposition without knowing the other, at least implicitly. Barring this, I would be able to show that the claim “I exist” either entails or is entailed by statements of the proposed sort by some sort of logical, grammatical or linguistic analysis. However, from the point of view of the subject who asserts this claim, and leaving aside some speculative philosophical views, it is an entirely contingent matter whether my name is Steve Duncan, Napoleon Bonaparte, or that I happen to be the patient in bed 23 or that I am identical to any of these persons. Indeed, unless I knew that I existed independently of knowing these facts, there would be no way for me to confirm the claim that I am identical with the person named Steve Duncan, or Napoleon Bonaparte, or that I am identical with the patient in bed 23. It seems obvious, therefore, that the relation between the existential judgment “I exist” and any of the proposed analyses expressible in predicate logic of the sort considered here is clearly contingent and factual, not semantic or logical. In no way, then, is it a relation of *meaning* and thus analyzable out of either in relation to the other on logical, semantic, or linguistic grounds. If so, the attempt to eliminate any substantive content from the notion of existence or to reduce it to something expressible in quantification theory comes to nothing in the end. The question of the meaning of being remains very much on the table. More to the point, it has not been shown that quantification theory supports the Kantian denial that existence is a predicate even in my own case, let alone in the case of a necessary being such as God.

**Further Reflections on the Foregoing** If I know anything at all, or even can know anything at all, I know that I exist. However, my knowledge is not limited just to this claim. For example, if I know that I exist, I also know that *something exists*, and if I know that something exists, I know as well that it is *possible* for something to exist. It cannot be the case that I exist without it also being the case that something does. The former clearly entails the latter.[[16]](#footnote-16) Further, since actuality proves possibility, if I exist then it must be possible for me to do so, and so for the same reason, it must be possible for something to exist. Given these results, I also know that the propositions *nothing exists* and *it is impossible that anything exist* are false, and thus that their contradictories, *not nothing exists* and *it is not impossible that something exists* are true. Contemporary analytic philosophers may be inclined to think that these claims are trivial, empty, or at any rate metaphysically uninteresting, but they are wrong to think so. Let me briefly say why I think this is the case.

To being with, let us note that each of these claims is entailed by a proposition that I know with extrinsic certainty: *I exist*. As Descartes would say, I clearly and distinctly perceive that these statements do in fact follow from the claim that I exist and thus possess the same extrinsic certainty as the claim from which they ultimately derive. At the same time, all of these claims are contingent. Certainly, I need not have existed, and if I had not, would not have grasped that fact at all, let alone with extrinsic certainty. Further, it seems perfectly conceivable that nothing need have existed, or even have been possible in the sense corresponding to and following from the apprehension of actuality.[[17]](#footnote-17) As such, these claims are thus substantive or *synthetic* in Kant’s sense of the term insofar as they reflect not merely linguistic usage or “relations between ideas” but state objective facts about the world. This means that they are thus *factual*, and not merely theory-laden or theory-guided acts of positing, and the facts about that world they state are not eliminable by any sort of logical sleight-of-hand. More than this, it means that they are about objects in the world, and thus assert something about them that is irreducible to any other predicate or set of predicates, but rather about something unique and irreducible that we can call their being or existence. Finally, these facts are apprehended by us through an incorrigible act of intuitive reflection on our own nature rather than derived from, or dependent on, sense experience. They nevertheless represent the most certain and most fundamental truths knowable by human reason.

All of this, of course, is completely contrary to the Humean doctrine, which Kant imbibed and consistently followed to his cost, introducing impenetrable obscurity and incoherence into his theoretical philosophy. However, a Kantian philosophy from which the Humean leaven has been purged, so that Kant does not have to constantly turn away from the conclusions to which his arguments lead in order to accommodate the demands of his disastrous “Copernican revolution” in philosophy, shows great promise of leading us, not to the novel ideas with which his name has become inextricably bound, but to the truth that already resided in the tradition that he and Hume worked so hard to overthrow. In a subsequent essay, I hope to show this with regard to Kant’s neglected possibility proof of God’s existence.

1. I am thinking of recent writers on Kant’s theoretical philosophy, such as Henry Allison, Rae Langton, Lorne Falkenstein and Arthur W. Collins. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, Vol. I, edited and Translated by Leroy M, Loemker, Chicago, Il., University of Chicago Press, 1956, 259-262. Immanuel Kant, *The Only Possible Basis for a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, Gordon Treash, trans., Lincoln, NB, University of Nebraska Press, 1979. The German title is *Der Einzig Mogliche Beweisgrund*, so I will refer to this text as the *Beweisgrund*. See especially pages 57-67 (All even pages sport the German text for comparison with the English translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Immanuel Kant, *The Only Possible Basis for a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, Gordon Treash, trans., Lincoln, NB, University of Nebraska Press, 1979. The German title is *Der Einzig Mogliche Beweisgrund*, so I will refer to this text as the *Beweisgrund*. See especially pages 57-67 (All even pages sport the German text for comparison with the English translation [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Op. cit, 501, A593/B621, near the bottom. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Op. cit, 501, A593/B621, near the bottom. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, I, Q2, Art. 2, c. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Richard Popkin, ed., Indianapolis, IN., Hackett Publishing, 2nd ed., 1998, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Nor, for that matter, does Kant; see A. O. Lovejoy’s “Dogmatism and Criticism,” reprinted in Moltke Gram, *Kant: Disputed Questions*, New York, Quadrangle Books, 1967, 119-120 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *Beweisgrund*, 59-64, and the First *Critique*, 504-506, A598/B626 near the bottom to A601/B629, end. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. First Critique, loc. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Op. cit., 503, A597/B625, top. Kant may well be begging the question here, by assuming that we can think (or conceive) the concept of God “solely in reference to its possibility,” i.e. independently of whether or not it exists, something precisely denied by the proponent of the ontological argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Kant does not rely on the parody argument strategy used by Guanilo and by many contemporary philosophers to prove that the ontological argument is fallacious. That is just as well, since it is worthless as a criticism of the argument. The point of a counterexample is to show that an argument is invalid by producing an argument with logically the same form with all true premises and a false conclusion. However, the ontological argument has been formalized by logicians and shown to be a valid proof so far forth. While this is not always a good reason for affirming that a conclusion has been proved (witness Fitch’s paradox), it shows that the problem is not in the logical structure of the argument. In that case, the problem in the parody arguments has to lie in the truth of the premises. The theist can confirm this even without any explanation of which premise or premises might be false. However, my bet is that the standard problem with the parody arguments arise from the attempt to tack the notions of “existence” or “necessary existence” onto the concept of something contingent, like an island, that is by its nature indifferent to existence and thus to which the concepts of existence or necessary existence cannot belong. To make such a stipulation then, is already to land in a contradiction, and to “tack on” the notion of existence in such a case is genuinely fallacious. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Op. cit. 503-504, A597-B625 to the end. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In particular, the claim that all necessary truths are tautologies or reducible to logical or linguistic truths is surely exploded by now. Even if in the cases I have mentioned some sort of “reduction” of this sort can be accomplished, the notion that my knowledge of these claims rests, even implicitly, on the truth of such a reduction is surely false. (Here I agree with Lovejoy, op. cit., 127-128.) To pursue such an analysis, then, can prove nothing and is completely futile if one’s purpose is to resurrect classical empiricism, though it may be useful for other purposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. G. E. Moore, “Is Existence a Predicate?,” in *Philosophical Papers*, New York, Collier Books, 1962, 114-125; the paper was originally published in 1936. Yet Moore stops short of endorsing the claim that “exists” is meaningless, apparently meaning by this that its meaning is exhausted in the functioning of a syncategorematic logical operator and thus lacks substantive meaning-content; see page 125. His misgivings are both significant and relevant to our discussion here, but there is not space to take them up. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. It is to be noted that these claims, like “I exist” resist translation into the predicate calculus, unless we are willing to treat “something” as a predicate, in which case, the notion of existence will have been surreptitiously smuggled into the predicate expression in the putative analysis. Indeed, this is even clearer in the case of these statements than it is in the case of “I exist.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The emphasis here is on “seems.” Actually, if Kant’s possibility proof of God’s existence is sound, then it is not possible that nothing exist; see my “Kant’s Proof for God’s Existence” also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)