

Kant on ‘The Cosmological Argument’

In this paper, I examine Kant’s discussion of ‘the cosmological argument’ in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Transcendental Doctrine of Elements, Second Part, Second Division, Book 2, Chapter Three, Section Five (‘The Impossibility of a Cosmological Proof of the Existence of God’). While there are other places where Kant provides related discussions of ‘the cosmological argument’—e.g. in *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, and *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*—I shall not attempt to consider any of these further works in this paper.

1. First Pass

In roughest outline, Kant says that ‘the cosmological argument’ goes like this:

1. Necessarily, if something exists, then a necessary being exists. (Premise)
2. Something exists. (Lemma 1)
3. (Therefore) God exists. (From 1, 2, Lemma 2)

Lemma 1 goes like this:

1. I exist. (Premise)
2. (Therefore) Something exists. (From 1)

Lemma 2 goes like this:

1. A necessary being exists. (Premise)
2. (Therefore) God exists. (From 1)

Kant’s critique of ‘the cosmological argument’ begins with Lemma 2. Kant claims that Lemma 2 ‘assumes’ ‘the ontological argument’.

Kant does not tell us how ‘the ontological argument’ goes. He does refer to ‘the famous ontological argument of Descartes’; but that is not sufficient to identify a single argument, i.e. a single premise set and conclusion.

Suppose we formulate Descartes’ argument like this:

1. God is a perfect being. (Premise)

2. A perfect being has every perfection. (Premise)
3. Existence is a perfection. (Premise)
4. Whatever has existence exists. (Premise)
5. (Therefore) God exists. (From 1, 2, 3 and 4)

How, exactly, does the argument that Kant calls ‘the cosmological argument’ ‘assume’ this Cartesian argument? Indeed, more generally, what could it be for one argument to ‘assume’ another argument?

The only plausible model, I think, is given in my formulation of what Kant calls ‘the cosmological argument’: one argument ‘assumes’ a second argument just in case it takes that second argument as a lemma.

If that is right, then an obvious question to ask is: how could Lemma 2 take anything like Descartes’ ontological argument as a lemma? There is only one premise in Lemma 2, and it can be inferred from the major premise and Lemma 1 as follows:

1. Necessarily, if something exists, a necessary being exists. (Premise)
2. Something exists. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) a necessary being exists.

It is obvious to inspection that Lemma 2 does not take a Cartesian ontological argument as a lemma. So, on what looks like the only plausible construal of what it is for one argument to ‘assume’ another, it is not true that ‘the cosmological argument’ ‘assumes’ ‘the ontological argument’.

This is not to say that Kant’s initial criticism of ‘the cosmological argument’ is *entirely* without merit. There are three points at which ‘the cosmological argument’ is open to challenge. First, one might question the major premise. Second, one might challenge the validity of Lemma 2. Third, one might engage in wholesale repudiation of modality, or, at any rate, of *de re* modality.

There is plainly a serious question about the validity of Lemma 2. If we suppose, as Kant does, that to be God is to be an *ens realissimum*, a highest being, a being that possesses every perfection, then there is clearly a question to be asked about how we can justifiably infer from the mere necessity of a thing to its perfect goodness, perfect power, perfect wisdom, perfect justice, perfect mercy, and so forth. Why could not it be that, even though there are necessary things, there is no God?

All contemporary proponents of cosmological arguments feel the force of this question. None of them supposes that cosmological arguments are standalone arguments that demonstrate the existence of God. Rather, all recognise that further arguments must be wheeled in to show that the

being whose existence is established by a given cosmological argument—a first cause, a necessary non-abstract being, a ground of contingency, or whatever—possesses the familiar divine attributes. (See, for example, Craig (1979), Koons (1997), Gale and Pruss (1999), and O'Connor (2008).)

Kant says:

What [a necessary] being might have in the way of properties, the empirical ground of proof cannot teach; rather, here reason says farewell to it entirely and turns its inquiry back to mere concepts: namely, to what kinds of properties in general an absolutely necessary being would have to have. ... [R]eason believes it meets with these requisites solely and uniquely in the concept of a most real being, and so it infers: that is the absolutely necessary being. (*CPR* A605/B633)

Kant then adds:

It is clear that here one presupposes that the concept of a being of the highest reality completely suffices for the concept of an absolute necessity of existence, i.e. that from the former the latter may be inferred – a proposition the ontological proof asserted, which one thus assumes in the cosmological proof. (*CPR* A607/B635)

What Kant says is clear here is anything but. As Kant says first up, what we want to know is what properties are essential to any necessary being. In particular, we would like to know whether the divine attributes are essential to a necessary being. But these questions are plainly distinct from questions about which properties are essential to God—to the being that has all and only the perfections as essential properties—and, in particular, to questions about whether necessary existence belongs to God. Answers to the first pair of questions are independent from—and make no ‘presuppositions’ concerning—answers to the second pair of questions.

As many commentators have noted, Kant digs himself into a hole when he tries to clarify his claims ‘in a scholastically correct way’. According to Kant, the claim that *every necessary being is a divine being* is ‘convertible’ with (1) the claim that *some divine being is a necessary being*; and (2) the claim that *every divine being is a necessary being*. That is, Kant claims (1a) *every necessary being is a divine being* entails *some divine being is a necessary being*; and (2a) *some divine being is a necessary being* entails *every divine being is a necessary being*. (The second entailment is allegedly supported by the observation that divine beings are indiscernible: ‘one *ens realissimum* does not differ the least bit from another’.)

Recall that the conclusion of ‘the cosmological argument’ is that a divine being exists (‘God exists’). We are worrying about the inference from ‘a necessary being exists’ to ‘a divine being exists’. One way to make this inference secure would be to suppose that every necessary being is a divine being. But, despite Kant’s claims to the contrary, one can suppose that every necessary being

is a divine being without supposing either that some divine being is a necessary being or that every divine being is a necessary being. It is simply not true that *every necessary being is a divine being* entails *some divine being is a necessary being*; and, even if it is (necessarily) true that there is at most one divine being, it is simply not true that *every necessary being is a divine being* entails *every divine being is a necessary being*.

True enough, given that there is a necessary being, that there is at most one divine being, and that every necessary being is a divine being, it follows that every divine being is a necessary being. The following argument is valid:

1. There is a necessary being. (Premise)
2. There is at most one divine being. (Premise)
3. Every necessary being is a divine being. (Premise)
4. (Therefore) Every divine being is a necessary being. (From 1, 2, and 3.)

But even if you think that the claim that every divine being is a necessary being is the *nervus probandi* of ‘the ontological argument’, and even if you also think that you can infer this claim from other claims that figure in ‘the cosmological argument’, it simply does not follow that ‘the cosmological argument’ ‘assumes’ ‘the ontological argument’.

The (provisional) upshot of this first rough pass through Kant’s initial criticism of ‘the cosmological argument’ is that the criticism misfires: Kant does not here provide a cogent critique of ‘the cosmological argument’. While he does focus on a genuine weak point in cosmological arguments—the gap between the existence of a first cause (a necessary non-abstract being, a ground of contingency) and the existence of God—he does not provide compelling reason for supposing that this gap in ‘the cosmological argument’ is unbridgeable.

2. Second Pass

While I think that my first rough pass through Kant’s initial criticism of ‘the cosmological argument’ may be fine as far as it goes, there is much that can be done to smooth away rough edges. I begin with some observations about my use of ‘scare quotes’ around the expressions ‘the cosmological argument’ and ‘the ontological argument’.

Anybody who knows anything about arguments about the existence of God knows that there are many very different ontological arguments and many very different cosmological arguments.

Among ontological arguments, Anselm's *Proslogion 2* argument, Descartes' *Meditation V* argument, Gödel's higher-order argument, Plantinga's modal argument, and many others, have different conclusions and very different premise sets. Similarly, among cosmological arguments, the various kalām arguments, the first three of Aquinas' five ways, Leibniz's *Origins* argument, the more recent arguments of Koons, Gale and Pruss, O'Connor, and many others, also have different conclusions and very different premise sets.

There are very different considerations that arise in connection with different ontological arguments and different cosmological arguments. For each distinct premise set and conclusion, there is a distinct question about validity. While, in principle, it can be that distinct ontological arguments or distinct cosmological arguments share the same logical form, in fact, for the arguments mentioned above, each argument raises different questions about the support that the premises provide to the conclusion. Moreover, for each distinct premise set and conclusion, there are distinct questions that arise about the acceptability of at least some of the premises that figure in a given premise set. If we identify arguments with premise sets and conclusions, then, even in principle, for arguments that have the same conclusion, there are distinct considerations that arise about the acceptability of the premises of those arguments.

Kant says:

There are only three kinds of proof for the existence of God possible from speculative reason. All paths of which one may set forth with this aim either begin from determinate experience and the special constitution of our world of sense known through it, and ascend from that by means of laws of causality to the highest cause outside the world; or else they are empirically grounded on an experience that is only indeterminate, i.e. on some existence; or, finally, they abstract from all experience and infer the existence of a highest cause entirely a priori from mere concepts. The first proof is the physico-theological, the second the cosmological, and the third the ontological proof. There are no more of them, and there also cannot be any more. (*CPR* A590/B618)

According to Kant, the 'path' of 'the cosmological proof' begins with—is 'empirically grounded on'—'an experience that is only indeterminate'. What does this mean? When we look at familiar cosmological arguments, they do not contain premises that are concerned with 'indeterminate experiences'. Indeed, when we look at familiar cosmological arguments, there is typically no mention of experience in any of their premises.

In his discussion of 'the cosmological argument', Kant says:

The minor premise ['I exist'] contains an experience; the major premise ['Necessarily, if something exists, then a necessary being exists'] an inference from an experience in general to the existence of something necessary. (*CPR* A605/B633)

What does it mean to say that the premise ‘I exist’ ‘contains an experience’? On its face, this just looks like some kind of category error. I assume that what Kant has in mind is that any justification that anyone might have for asserting the words ‘I exist’ is *a posteriori*: it is only on the basis of having had some experiences that one can be justified in asserting that one exists.

Kant’s threefold classification of arguments from speculative reason for the existence of God is thus something like this: (a) there is ‘the ontological argument’, all of whose premises are justified *a priori*, i.e. independently of any experience; (b) there is ‘the cosmological argument’, some of whose premises are justified *a posteriori*, but only on the basis of the having of experience (and not on the details of the content of experience); and (c) there is ‘the teleological argument’, some of whose premises are justified *a posteriori* on the basis of the details of the content of particular experiences.

Kant’s project—in Ch. 3, Sec 4-6—is to show that it is impossible to prove the existence of God by any of these arguments from speculative reason. In particular, in Sec 5, on ‘the cosmological argument’, Kant aims to show that it is impossible to prove the existence of God by way of an argument some of whose premises are justified *a posteriori* but only on the basis of having experience (and not on the details of the content of that experience).

Kant’s characterisation of ‘the cosmological argument’ draws on broader features of his critical philosophy. Familiar contemporary typologies of arguments from speculative reason for the existence of God distinguish between arguments that appeal to fundamental structural features of reality—causation, dependence, law, modality, spacetime, and so on—and arguments that appeal to complex individual elements in reality—biological organisms, biological evolution, biochemical homeostasis, and so forth. However, for Kant, premises that advert to structural features of causation, dependence, law, modality and spacetime are claims that, insofar as they are justified, are justified on the basis of the having of experience, independently of the content of that experience.

It seems to me that there is something deeply unsatisfying—problematic—about the initial strategy that Kant employs in his discussion of ‘the cosmological argument’. His aim is to show that no cosmological proof succeeds. Moreover, his broader aim is to show that no proof from speculative reason succeeds. However, his initial discussion of ‘the cosmological argument’ is focused on a particular formulation of a cosmological argument, and the major faults to which he draws attention are faults in that particular formulation of a cosmological argument. Even if Kant’s initial criticism of ‘the cosmological argument’—the particular formulation that he considers—were utterly decisive, there is still an enormous gap between achievement and ambition. How can we be

sure that there is not some other cosmological argument that does not suffer from the vices of ‘the cosmological argument’?

True enough, Kant has independent reasons for thinking that there cannot be a successful cosmological argument. Indeed, he cites some of these reasons when he turns to consider the ‘nest of dialectical presumptions’ that ‘transcendental criticism can easily discover and destroy’. Consider, for example:

The transcendental principle of inferring from the contingent to a cause ... has significance only in the world of sense. ... The principle of causality has no significance at all and no mark of its use except in the world of sense. (*CPR* A609/B637)

While subsequent generations of philosophers—e.g. among the positivists and the logical positivists—were prepared to take an even harder line, it is clear that, if you buy enough of the contestable features of Kant’s worldview, then you will suppose that there can be no proof from speculative reason of the existence of God. But, in the initial part of Ch.3, Sec 5, Kant is not just saying: there can be no proof from speculative reason of the existence of God because ... critical philosophy! The claim that all arguments from speculative reason for the existence of God depend upon the mistaken view that existence is a real predicate is plainly intended to be a contribution to philosophical theology that stands independently of the main contours of Kant’s critical philosophy.

3. Third Pass

Even if the initial part of Ch. 3, Sec 5 is meant to be a contribution to philosophical theology that stands independently of the main contours of Kant’s critical philosophy, there may be details of this part of the discussion of ‘the cosmological argument’ that depend upon Kant’s critical philosophy.

Consider, for example, Lemma 2. In my earlier discussion, I presented this as follows:

1. A necessary being exists. (Premise)
2. (Therefore) God exists (From 1.)

But, in the text, we are actually given a much more complex piece of reasoning:

The necessary being can be determined only in one single way, i.e., in regard to all possible predicates, it can be determined by only one of them, so consequently it must be thoroughly determined through its concept. Now only one single concept of a thing is possible that thoroughly determines the thing *a priori*, namely that of an *ens realissimum*: Thus the concept of the most real

being is the only single one through which a necessary being can be thought, i.e., there necessarily exists a highest being. (CPR A605/B633)

This text has some characteristically maddening features. For example, the terms ‘*ens realissimum*’, ‘highest being’ and ‘most real being’ are used interchangeably; if this were not so, the argument of the passage would be evidently invalid. In this passage, the words ‘necessary being’ are nowhere preceded by the word ‘absolutely’; however, in the preceding passage, the words ‘absolutely necessary being’ were used throughout. In this passage, the words ‘a priori’ appear exactly once (in the expression ‘thoroughly determined a priori’); if the words ‘a priori’ add anything in this single use, then the argument of the passage is plainly invalid. In this passage, the word “necessarily” occurs in the conclusion of the argument, even though it does not occur in the conclusion of the preceding argument; again, if the word “necessarily” has some significance in the conclusion, then it seems that the argument of the passage is plainly invalid. In this passage, we begin with “the necessary being” even though the conclusion of the preceding passage was merely that “a necessary being exists”. (Perhaps we might think to fix this by supposing that we arbitrarily select a necessary being to be the focus of the second part of the argument: ‘the necessary being’ is just ‘the necessary being that we have arbitrarily selected for attention’. But that seems inconsistent with the claim that the necessary being is thoroughly determined through its concept.)

A rough approximation to the argument of the passage is something like this:

1. The necessary being exists. (Premise; conclusion of preceding argument.)
2. The necessary being is thoroughly determined through its concept. (Lemma 3)
3. The only thing that is thoroughly determined through its concept is the highest being. (Premise)
4. (Therefore) The highest being exists. (From 1, 2, and 3)

Lemma 3

1. The necessary being can be determined by only one among all possible predicates. (Premise)
2. (Therefore) The necessary being is thoroughly determined through its concept.

While this approximation seems to get to the desired conclusion from the given premises, it is not clear that it fully captures the Kantian formulation. The obvious way to think about the argument that I have given is that we get to the conclusion that the highest being exists from the premise that the necessary being exists by establishing that the necessary being is the highest being. But the final sentence of the quoted passage might be taken to suggest a different structure for the argument:

1. The necessary being exists. (Premise; conclusion of preceding argument.)
2. The concept of the highest being is the only one through which a necessary being can be thought. (Lemma 4)
3. (Therefore) Necessarily, there is a highest being. (From 1, 2)

Lemma 4

1. The necessary being is thoroughly determined through its concept. (Premise)
2. The only thing that is thoroughly determined through its concept is the highest being. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) The concept of the highest being is the only one through which a necessary being can be thought. (From 1, 2)

This formulation of the argument seems quite unsatisfactory. In particular, it is surely obvious that a necessary being can be thought through the concept of a necessary being. The concept of a necessary being is hardly in worse standing than the concept of a highest being; if there were some objection to talk of the concept of a necessary being, there would surely be equally compelling objection to talk of a highest being. But, if a necessary being can be thought through the concept of a necessary being, then it is simply false that the concept of the highest being is the only one through which a necessary being can be thought. Perhaps it is worth recalling that the conclusion of the first part of the argument is that a necessary being exists. We cannot even formulate that conclusion unless the concept of a necessary being is in good standing.

Perhaps it is also worth noting that, on this alternative formulation, there might be some temptation to think that the first premise is redundant. It is consistent with the written text that Kant thinks that ‘the cosmological argument’ requires that the claim that *necessarily, there is a highest being* is entailed by the claim that *the concept of the highest being is the only one through which a necessary being can be thought*. But we have already seen that we can reach the desired conclusion, using the premises that Kant introduces, without taking that argumentative route.

However Kant thinks that the second part of ‘the cosmological argument’ is supposed to run, there are important questions to ask about the acceptability of its premises. In particular, we need to know what it is for a thing to be ‘thoroughly determined’ by its concept. And, in order to understand this, we need to know what, for a given thing, makes a particular concept *its* concept.

If we are to suppose that, for a given thing, there is a particular concept that is *its* concept, then it seems natural to suppose that a concept of a given thing must give a complete representation of the properties of that thing: for each property that the thing has, the concept includes that property; and for each property that the thing lacks, the concept does not include that property. But

this cannot be right: for, on this way of thinking about concepts, each thing would be thoroughly determined by its concept (and so Premise 3 in our representation of the argument would be false).

However, if we suppose that a concept of a given thing need not give a complete representation of the properties of that thing, then it becomes quite unclear why there cannot be many different concepts of any given thing. If ‘the morning star’ and ‘the evening star’ are distinct concepts of the same thing—the planet Venus—then we have a model for cases in which there are different concepts of the same thing. It is very hard to see why it could not be the case that there is a concept other than ‘the highest being’ that is nonetheless a concept of the highest being; and it is very hard to see why it could not be the case that there is a concept other than ‘the necessary being’ that is nonetheless a concept of the necessary being. Again, this looks like it cannot be right: for, on this way of thinking about concepts, it is not true that, for ‘the highest being’ that there is a concept that is *its* concept; and it is not true for ‘the necessary being’ that there is a concept that is *its* concept. But that means that neither Premise 2 nor Premise 3 is properly formed: in each of these premises, the expression ‘its concept’ fails to have a unique referent.

Of course, it is important not to lose sight of the overall dialectic. Kant does not intend to praise ‘the cosmological argument’ that he formulates. However, it is questionable what value is to be found in savaging an argument that you have been careless in constructing. In the initial discussion in Ch. 3, Sec 5, Kant allows—if only for the sake of argument—that the first part of ‘the cosmological argument’ does establish that there is at least one necessary being. But, if that is so, then the only remaining task is one of identification: if we can show that, among the necessary beings that there are, at least one of them is a highest being—and if we can establish relevant proofs of uniqueness—then we shall have established that the highest being exists. We do not need a new proof of existence to get from what Kant is prepared to concede—if only for the sake of argument—to the conclusion at which the cosmological arguer aims. There are many different paths that lead to the conclusion that it cannot be that ‘the cosmological argument’ ‘assumes’ ‘the ontological argument’.

4. Natural Necessity

Is it true that the first part of ‘the cosmological argument’ does establish that there is at least one necessary being? Does Kant provide us with good grounds for rejecting the soundness of the first part of ‘the cosmological argument’?

Kant complains about ‘the inference from the impossibility of an infinite series of causes one upon another to a first cause, which the principles of the use of reason itself cannot justify our inferring within experience, still less our extending this principle to somewhere beyond it’; and about ‘the false self-satisfaction reason finds in regard to the completion of [the series of causes] by the fact that one finally does away with every condition ... and one’s assuming this to be the completion of one’s concept’; and about ‘the confusion of the logical possibility of a concept ... with its transcendental possibility ... which once again can only apply to the field of possible experiences’. (*CPR* A610/B638)

These complaints are, I think, intended to strike against the major premise of the first part of the cosmological argument, i.e. against the claim that, necessarily, if something exists, then a necessary being exists. But it is not clear that they land a serious blow.

Consider the following argument:

1. Some things cause other things. (Premise)
2. Whenever one thing causes a second thing, and that second thing a third, then the first thing causes the third. (Premise)
3. Nothing causes itself. (Premise)
4. There is no infinite regress of causes. (Premise)
5. (Therefore) There are first causes, i.e. things that cause other things but that themselves have no causes. (From 1, 2, 3, and 4.)

This argument is valid. Moreover, the premises other than Premise 4 all look very solid. But, if that’s right, then this argument justifies the inference from the impossibility of an infinite series of causes to a first cause. I think that Kant accepts the first three premises ‘within experience’; but, if that’s so, then—contrary to what Kant claims—the inference from denial of infinite regress to first cause *is* justified ‘within experience’.

Suppose that we grant that there is no infinite regress of causes ‘within experience’, i.e. within the world described by science. By the above argument, we can infer that our world has a causal origin: it begins with something that has no cause. Call this causal origin ‘the initial singularity’. It is plausible to suppose that the initial singularity is necessary: every possible world begins with the same initial singularity, and diverges from the actual world only as the result of the outplaying of objective chance. On this view, whatever exists in the initial singularity exists of necessity: but everything in this view falls ‘within experience’, i.e. within the world that is described by science.

There may be other ways of arguing for the conclusion that the existence of a necessary first cause does not require any assumptions that are not justified ‘within experience’. However, it is enough that we have one model: there is nothing in the complaints that Kant puts forward that touch the view that the initial singularity is necessary (or that whatever exists in the initial singularity is necessary).

Perhaps it might be objected that the initial singularity—or any thing that exists in the initial singularity—is not the kind of thing that can be absolutely necessary. But I take it that whatever is necessary is such that it obtains no matter what: there is nothing on which that which is necessary depends. So there is no distinction between necessity and absolute necessity. If you insist: the initial singularity *is* absolutely necessary; but Gricean strictures tell you to say only that the initial singularity is necessary.

Perhaps it might then be said that the initial singularity—or any thing that exists in the initial singularity—is not the kind of thing that can be necessary. But attempts to justify this contention are underwhelming. Inductive arguments—from the (presumed) contingency of the current state of the natural world and its contents—overlook the evidently special status of the initial state of the natural world and its contents. No one can accept an inductive argument—from the ubiquity of natural causes for the current state of the natural world and its contents—to the conclusion that there is a natural cause of the initial state of the natural world and its contents. What reason is there to suppose that an inductive argument for the contingency of the initial state of the natural world and its contents is any more compelling?

Perhaps it will be insisted—quite correctly—that the conception of necessity that is in play here cannot be the conception of necessity that Kant employs. Kant says:

[T]he condition that one demands for absolute necessity can be encountered only in a single being which therefore must contain everything in its concept that is required for absolute necessity and thus makes possible an inference *a priori* to that. ... [I]f one proposes to cognise something as absolutely necessary, then that cognition must also carry absolute necessity with it. ... [R]eason recognises as absolutely necessary only what is necessary from its concept. (*CPR* A611/B639)

It is not in the least bit plausible to suppose that it is a conceptual truth that the initial singularity is necessary: mere *a priori* reflection alone could not possibly justify us in supposing that the initial singularity is necessary. But it is the thought that *a posteriori* theorising might justify the claim that the initial singularity is necessary that allows us to insist that we might come to the view that the initial singularity is necessary ‘within experience’.

By the lights of Kant's critical philosophy, there are no objective grounds to justify acceptance of the claim that, necessarily, if something exists, then a necessary being exists. But Kant's critical philosophy is not compulsory. Not everyone shares the Kantian ambition to place strict requirements on speculative reason in order to make room for faith in God, trust in freedom and hope for immortality. When, at the very end of Ch. 3, Sec. 5, Kant says:

[R]eason consists just in the fact that we can give an account of all of our concepts, opinions and assertions. (*CPR* A614/B642)

it seems to me to be apt to reply that, in part, reason consists in recognising that we have no account to give of some of our concepts, opinions and assertions. Every philosophical inquiry terminates with the turning of a spade; but it is never the case that it would be impossible to go on digging. In particular, it is bound to be the case, in any worldview, that some claims are accepted either as brute contingencies or as brute necessities. What really matters, from the standpoint of reason, is whether a given worldview can reasonably be considered superior to accessible alternatives. It is no easy task to show that worldviews that hold that, *necessarily, if something exists, a necessary being exists*, cannot satisfy this requirement.

5. Empty Names and Non-Existent Objects

There are still many difficulties in Kant's discussion of 'the cosmological argument' that I have not yet examined. Consider, again, the following passage (much of which was cited earlier):

[R]eason believes that it meets with [the requisite conditions for an absolute necessity] solely and uniquely in the concept of a most real being and so it infers: that is the absolutely necessary being. But it is clear that here one presupposes that the concept of a being of the highest reality completely suffices for the concept of an absolute necessity of existence. ... Absolute necessity is an existence from mere concepts. If I say: the concept of an *ens realissimum* is a concept, and indeed the one single concept, that fits necessary existence and is adequate to it, then I must admit that the latter could be concluded from it. (*CPR* A607/B635)

Suppose we grant—at least for the sake of argument—that there are such things as the concept of a most real being and the concept of an absolutely necessary being. How should we think about these concepts? In particular, what should we say about the content of these concepts?

A natural thought is this: the content of the concept *C* is given by a set of sentences of the form *necessarily, for any x, if x is C then x is F*. So, for example, the content of the concept of a most real being might include the following sentences:

Necessarily, for any *x*, if *x* is a most real being, then *x* is omnipotent.

Necessarily, for any *x*, if *x* is a most real being, then *x* is omniscient.

Necessarily, for any *x*, if *x* is a most real being, then *x* is perfectly good.

And the content of the concept of an absolutely necessary being might include the following sentences:

Necessarily, for any *x*, if *x* is an absolutely necessary being, then *x* does not depend for its existence on anything else.

Necessarily, for any *x*, if *x* is an absolutely necessary being, then *x* does not depend for its nature on anything else.

Suppose—following Kant—that we accept that the required conditions for an absolutely necessary being are met solely and uniquely by a most real being. That is, suppose that we accept that, necessarily, for any *x*, *x* is an absolutely necessary being iff *x* is a most real being.

This does not yield any justification for supposing that there is an absolutely necessary being (or that there is a most real being). Nor does it yield any justification for saying—as Kant does—that *that* [the most real being] is the absolutely necessary being. Moreover, this is true even if we suppose that the concept of a most real being includes:

Necessarily, for any *x*, *x* is a most real being only if *x* exists of absolute necessity.

All that these concepts supply us with are strict generalisations.

Suppose, nonetheless, that we choose to introduce a name for a most real being—say: ‘God’. Since it is plausible that there cannot be more than one most real being, we might even say that this name applies to *the* most real being. What can we now say truly using the name ‘God’?

Perhaps you might think that we can say the following things:

God is omnipotent.

God is omniscient.

God is perfectly good.

And perhaps you might add that these claims are conceptual truths: it just follows, from the (individual) concept of God, that God—the most real being—is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and so on.

However, if we say all of this, then clearly there is a problem looming. Restricting our attention to the present case, we may be happy to conclude that God also exists of absolute necessity. But there are all kinds of other concepts that we can form that include a condition of the form:

Necessarily, if x is a C , then x exists of absolute necessity.

Since, for example, it is not true that there exist creatures that have more or less all of the characterising properties of unicorns except that they also exist of absolute necessity, there must be a misstep in the line of thought that has led us to this point.

We might deny that what it takes for a concept to ‘fit’ and ‘be adequate to’ certain conditions is not a matter of the inclusion of those conditions in the characterising content of the concept. Whether there is a most real being that exists of absolute necessity is not a question that is resolved by looking to the content of the concept of a most real being; rather, it is a question that is resolved, if it can be resolved, by looking to see whether there is a most real being (and whether it exists of absolute necessity). If we take this option, then we might pair it with the further view that we cannot introduce a name ‘ N ’ in connection with a description ‘the C ’ unless we have first satisfied ourselves that there is something that satisfies the description ‘the C ’. And, pushing a little further, we might also deny that there are any such things as non-existent objects. If we take this line, we can accept the account of concepts, and we can allow that existence and necessary can figure in the strict generalisations that characterise the content of concepts.

Alternatively, we might accept that there are non-existent objects, that we can just introduce a name ‘ N ’ in connection with a description ‘the C ’, and we can take it that what it is for a concept to ‘fit’ and ‘be adequate to’ certain conditions is just a matter of the inclusion of those conditions in the characterising content of the concept. However, if we do all this, then we need to restrict the characterising conditionals in the way that contemporary Meinongians do. In particular, we must bar conditionals of the form:

Necessarily, for any x , if x is C , then x exists

Necessarily, for any x , if x is C , then x necessarily exists

Necessarily, for any x , if x is C , then x absolutely necessarily exists

on pain of generating falsehoods (such as the claim that there exist creatures that have more or less all of the characterising properties of unicorns except that they also exist of absolute necessity).

The upshot here is not that existence is not a predicate, nor even that existence is not a predicate that can figure in the strict generalisations that characterise the content of concepts. There are theoretical options that do not hew this line. But, whichever theoretical option we take, we cannot follow Kant when he says:

Absolute necessity is an existence from mere concepts. If I say: the concept of an *ens realissimum* is a concept, and indeed the one single concept, that fits necessary existence and is adequate to it, then I must admit that the latter could be concluded from it. (*CPR* A607/B635)

If we are to ‘draw conclusions from a concept’, then we must be making use of the strict generalisations that characterise the content of that concept. But, if we suppose that the strict generalisations that characterise the content of concepts have ‘consequents’ that attribute existence, necessary existence, absolutely necessary existence, and the like, then, *in those cases*, we certainly cannot be ‘drawing conclusions from the concept’ about existence, necessary existence, and absolutely necessary existence: for, permitting ourselves to act in that way would open the floodgates to belief in the existence, necessary existence, and absolutely necessary existence of a multitude of things that simply do not exist.

Perhaps some might resist the line of argument that I have been developing by insisting that there are privileged concepts to which the more general stricture does not apply. For example, some might wish to distinguish between ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ concepts, and to insist that, while ‘absolutely necessary being’ and ‘most real being’ are natural concepts, ‘creature that has more or less all of the characterising properties of unicorns except that it also exists of absolute necessity’ is an artificial concept. This objection seems entirely unconvincing to me. I don’t see anything ‘natural’ about the concepts ‘absolutely necessary being’ and ‘most real being’; on any plausible way of measuring naturalness, I see no significant difference between these concepts and ‘creature that has more or less all of the characterising properties of unicorns except that it also exists of absolute necessity’.

6. Unsatisfied Predicates and Uninstantiated Properties

Questions about empty names and non-existent objects might also turn our attention to questions about unsatisfied predicates and uninstantiated properties. Very early in the preceding discussion, I

criticised Kant for making use of what might be supposed to be traditional claims about the ‘convertibility’ of universally and existentially quantified claims. Is it unfair to criticise Kant for making use of what were once widely accepted principles of logic?

I do not think so. It is true that we can adapt our logic to accommodate the view that there are no unsatisfied predicates, just as it is true that we can adapt our logic to accommodate the view that there are no empty names. If we wish to make use of classical predicate calculus, we need to make sure that we are not trying to apply it to inferences that can only be adequately handled in free logic. If we are arguing about existence in a context in which potentially empty names are in use, then we simply cannot invoke classical predicate calculus: for any individual constant a , it is a theorem of the classical predicate calculus that there exists something that is identical to a (which is just a longwinded way of saying that a exists). So, if we ignore the cautionary advice, we might take ourselves to have a logical proof that God, Santa Claus, and anything else you please exists.

If we wish to make use of Aristotelian predicate logic, we need to make sure that we are not trying to apply it to inferences in a context in which potentially empty predicates are in use. This is not just an argument with the benefit of hindsight; it should have been apparent to anyone who uses Aristotelian logic that this restriction must be observed. Consider the following pair of claims:

1. Every unicorn has a single horn on its head
2. There are no unicorns

Anyone who accepts that (2) is true accepts that there are empty predicates; and denying that there are unicorns is surely the commonsense position. But anyone who accepts that (1) is true—perhaps simply as a matter of definition—and who accepts the first convertibility principle upon which Kant relies is obliged to reject (2): if every unicorn has a single horn on its head, then, by the relevant convertibility principle, it follows that there exists at least one unicorn that has a single horn on its head.

When Kant claims that *every absolutely necessary being is a most real being* entails *some most real beings are absolutely necessary beings*, he ought to have noted that this is only so if ‘absolutely necessary being’ and ‘most real being’ are non-empty predicates. In a context in which we are arguing about whether there are absolutely necessary beings and most real beings, it is obvious—and it should have been obvious to Kant—that the condition for the legitimate application of the convertibility principle cannot be taken to be satisfied without supposing the truth of the claim that we are aiming to establish by this very use of the convertibility principle.

7. Concluding Summary

In this chapter, I have argued for two main claims.

First, I have argued that it is not true that cosmological arguments depend upon ontological arguments, and that Kant is simply mistaken when he argues that ‘the cosmological argument’ ‘assumes’ ‘the ontological argument’. There are several ways in which Kant’s argument for this conclusion goes wrong. His detailed arguments rely upon logical principles that he ought to have been able to see cannot be applied in the context of those arguments; moreover, there is no plausible way of reaching his desired conclusion by another route that does not go through the logical principles upon which he relies. Quite apart from this technical problem, there is a strategic difficulty: Kant grants, for the sake of argument, that one can establish that there is an absolutely necessary being, and then tries to argue that you need ‘the ontological argument’ in order to get from there to the conclusion that there is a most real being. But, given that you have already established the *existence* of an absolutely necessary being, all that remains to be done is to show that that being is a most real being; and that *identificatory* task cannot require, as a lemma, an argument whose conclusion is that a most real being exists. None of this is to deny that there is a genuine gap in cosmological arguments for the existence of God that needs to be filled: it is one thing to show that there is, say, a first cause, and quite another thing to show that the first cause is God. However, there is nothing in Kant’s arguments that shows that there is no possible way of bridging this gap.

Second, I have argued that Kant does not provide a compelling critique of cosmological arguments to the conclusion that there is an absolutely necessary being. I maintain that it *is* true that, if you accept enough of Kant’s critical philosophy, then you will suppose that there is no successful argument from speculative reason for the existence of God. Indeed, if you accept enough of Kant’s critical philosophy, you will suppose that speculative reason cannot furnish us with adequate grounds to believe—let alone to know—that God exists. But Kant’s critical philosophy is not compulsory. And the claim that there is an absolutely necessary being can be perfectly well embraced by naturalists: there is no more difficulty involved in supposing that the initial singularity is absolutely necessary than there is in supposing that the initial singularity was created by an absolutely necessary God. While it is not common for naturalists to accept cosmological arguments for the existence of an absolutely necessary being, it seems to me that there is no need for naturalists to make a strenuous search for objections to such arguments. Moreover, since it is unlikely that any naturalists accept Kant’s critical philosophy, it is unlikely that any naturalists should be persuaded by *Kant’s* criticisms of cosmological arguments to reject the claim that there is an absolutely necessary being.

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