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### Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Ünügür Tabur, Ayşenur. 2022. "The relevance of Kant's objection to the ontological arguments and Avicenna's exploration of existence as an alternative grounding." *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 18 (2): S5–27. <https://doi.org/10.31820/ejap.18.2.6>.

# THE RELEVANCE OF KANT'S OBJECTION TO THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS AND AVICENNA'S EXPLORATION OF EXISTENCE AS AN ALTERNATIVE GROUNDING

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Original scientific article – Received: 11/04/2022 Accepted: 19/11/2022

## ABSTRACT

*In the present paper, the three most prominent formulations of the ontological argument will be analysed, namely the classical argument which renders existence a perfection, Norman Malcolm's modal version of the argument which labels not existence but necessary existence a perfection, and Alvin Plantinga's modal version of the argument which appeals to the possible worlds semantics to prove the necessity of God's existence. According to Kant's objection, the ontological argument takes existence to be a predicate that adds up a further perfection to the concept of God and thereby entails either a reference problem between the actual object and its concept or infers God's actual existence in a tautological way. Despite its impact, Kant's objection to the argument has been criticised for his ambiguous employment of the notion of existence as well as for being irrelevant to the ontological argument and to the modal ontological argument by Plantinga. In the present study, I aim first to show that Kant's objection is not only relevant to the classical version of the argument but also to the modal formulations of it as opposed to Plantinga's claim. In doing so, I argue that it is not Kant's use of the notion of existence that is ambiguous, but it is the classical and modal versions of the ontological argument which gain their apparent strength from their ambiguous employment of the notion of existence. Second purpose of the paper is to give an alternative analysis of the notion of existence based on Avicenna's metaphysics and thereby to point towards an alternative ground for a possible reformulation of the ontological argument, which could avoid Kant's objection.*

**Keywords:** *the Ontological Argument; Kant; existence; predicate; Avicenna.*

## 1. Introduction

Anselm of Canterbury's ontological argument has been among the most controversial theistic proofs that despite its unconvincing appearance, it is quite difficult to show which part of the argument is wrong (Russell 1946, 586; Plantinga 1997, 86; Nagasawa 2017, 132). In essence, it proposes to prove God's actual existence *a priori* by a conceptual analysis of the notion of God as the maximally great being/perfect being. There are various formulations of the ontological argument. In the present paper, the three most prominent formulations of the argument will be examined, namely the classical argument which renders existence a perfection, Norman Malcom's modal version of the argument which labels not existence but necessary existence a perfection, and Alvin Plantinga's modal version of the argument which appeals to the possible worlds semantics to prove that the coherency of the notion of maximally great being necessitates the exemplification of the property of maximal excellence in every possible world.

There have been various objections to the ontological argument. By far the most debated and challenging objection was raised by Kant who critiques the argument on the grounds of his dictum that "existence cannot be a real predicate". According to Kant's objection, the ontological argument takes existence to be a predicate that adds up a further perfection to the concept of God and thereby entails either a reference problem between the actual object and its concept or infers God's actual existence in a tautological way. Despite its impact, Kant's objection to the argument has been criticised for his ambiguous employment of the notion of "is" (*Sein*) in terms of not explicitly stating whether it refers to "existence, predication, identity or class-inclusion" (Hintikka 1981, 127). Furthermore, Kant's objection to the argument has been also criticised for being irrelevant to the ontological argument and to the modal ontological argument, in particular, by Plantinga.

In the present study, I aim first to show that Kant's objection is not only relevant to the classical version of the argument but also to the modal formulations of it as opposed to Plantinga's claim. In doing so, I argue that it is not Kant's use of the notion of existence that is ambiguous, but it is the classical and modal versions of the ontological argument which gain their apparent strength from their ambiguous employment of the notion of existence. Second purpose of the paper is to give an alternative analysis of the notion of existence based on Avicenna's metaphysics and thereby to point towards an alternative ground for a possible reformulation of the ontological argument, which could avoid Kant's objection.

## 2. Anselm's Argument in Proslogion II and III

In *Proslogion* II, Anselm introduces the notion of “something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought” (GB hereafter) along with the argument that the conceivability of such a notion entails its existence in reality given that the lack of its actual existence would imply a contradiction in the very concept. In claiming so, Anselm's main argument is that the existence *in re* in addition to existence *in intellectu*, at least for GB, is greater than GB's existence *in intellectu* alone. This being so, had GB existed only *in intellectu*, we would be able to conceive of a being greater than GB which would also exist *in re* and this would bring about a contradiction that there is a being which is greater than the being “than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought”. Anselm puts it as follows in *Proslogion* II:

And surely that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-can-be-thought. But this is obviously impossible. Therefore, there is absolutely no doubt that something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality. (Anselm 1998, 87-88)

The passage above is also the source of the debate whether Anselm refers to existence *in re* as a perfection for all beings or for only GB, or whether he refers to it as a perfection after all. For instance, Gaunilo's objection to Anselm's ontological argument is based on the presumption that the argument employs the notion of existence as a perfection in general, namely, the existence of anything *in intellectu* as well as *in re* is greater than its existence only *in intellectu*. Based on this presumption, Gaunilo establishes the possibility of the notion of a perfect “Lost Island” which could not be the perfect island unless it exists in reality, as well. But he argues that the possibility of conceiving the notion of such an island by no means entails its existence in the external world and draws the same conclusion for the notion of GB (Anselm 1998, 109). For Brian Davies, Anselm's reply to Gaunilo suggests that Anselm did not consider existence as a perfection for every being in that he makes a distinction between those beings that have a beginning and GB which has no beginning, and associates the entailment of GB's existence *in re* with his having no beginning in his existence. In Anselm's own words, “whatever can be thought of as existing and does not actually exist can be thought of as having a beginning of existence”, however, since GB “cannot be thought

save as being without a beginning”, it “cannot be thought of as existing and yet not actually exist” (Anselm 1988, 111-112). For Davies, what Anselm would like to point out is that “being *in re* and greatness somehow go together or imply each other” and he is not committed to the view that existence is a perfection only for GB, either. Rather, as Davies further argues, Anselm’s argument only requires the fulfilment of two conditions which are

that something than which nothing greater can be thought must exist, whole and entire, at all times and at all places, and (b) that something which might or might not exist is not something than which nothing greater can be thought. (Davies 2004, 161)

The issue whether existence is a perfection has been discussed in association with the question whether existence is a predicate and whether the ontological argument presumes that it is. In his work *Critique of the Pure Reason*, Kant presumes that the ontological argument labels existence a predicate that adds up a perfection to GB. Before elaborating on the replies to Kant’s objection as well as on the modal versions of the ontological argument as being responses to this objection, let us examine the objection in detail. The famous passage that is frequently quoted from *Critique of the Pure Reason* to prove that Kant dismisses existence as a real predicate is the following one:

Being [*Sein*] is obviously not a real predicate, i.e., a concept of something which could add to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations in themselves. In logical use it is merely the copula of a judgement. The proposition God is omnipotent contains two concepts that have their objects: God and omnipotence. The little word “is” is not a predicate in it, but only that which posits the predicate in relation to the subject. Now if we take the subject (God) together with all its predicates (among which omnipotence belongs), and say God is, or there is a God, then I add no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates and indeed posit the object in relation to my concept. Both must contain exactly the same, and hence when I think this object as given absolutely (through the expression, “it is”), nothing is thereby added to the concept, which expresses merely its possibility. Thus the actual contains nothing more than the merely possible. A hundred actual dollars do not contain the least bit more than a hundred possible ones. For since the latter signifies the concept and the

former its object and its positing in itself, then, in case the former contained more than the latter, my concept would not express the entire object and thus would not be the suitable concept of it. (Kant 1998, 567)

In analysing Kant's passage above, two things should be paid closer attention, namely, what he understands under the notion of *Sein* and what his notion of the "real predicate" as "adding something to (or extending) the concept of a thing" exactly refers to. In his article "Kant's Objection to the Ontological Argument", Plantinga scrutinises both of the notions, starting with Kant's distinction between "the content of a concept" and "the content of an object". For Kant, the former must be identical with the latter so that we can refer with the content of the object to the content of its concept, as in the case of the example of a hundred actual dollars and its concept. As Plantinga also suggests, Kant's use of "the content of a concept" of a thing corresponds to the "whole concept" of a thing, i.e., to "the concept whose content includes all (and only) the properties the object in question has" (Plantinga 1966, 540). He then investigates what Kant could have in mind when he distinguishes a real predicate from a non-real predicate and labels *Sein* a non-real predicate. He asks us to think of the whole concept of Taj Mahal  $C$  and this very concept diminished with respect to pinkness,  $C^P$ , as well as the objects that the properties of these concepts are ascribed to,  $Cx$  and  $C^Px$  respectively. As he rightly claims, it is possible that the latter could be exemplified while the former would remain non-exemplified, if, for instance, Taj Mahal were green. In other words, one can assume the truth of  $(\exists)C^Px$  without assuming the truth of  $(\exists)Cx$ , so the property of being pink seems to "add up" to the very concept  $C$ . Now Plantinga introduces the whole concept of Taj Mahal only diminished with respect to existence,  $C^E$ , as well as  $C^Ex$  as the object that the properties of this concept are ascribed. As Plantinga argues, the truth of the concept of Taj Mahal diminished with respect to existence, namely,  $(\exists)C^Ex$  could not obtain without  $(\exists)Cx$  being true. In this sense, existence neither adds to nor subtracts anything from the whole concept. This may be the reason why, as Plantinga concludes, Kant disregards existence as a real predicate (Plantinga 1966, 540-541).

Plantinga argues that Kant's objection, as he construes it, does not pose any threat to Anselm's ontological argument, nor does it bear any relevance to it. For him, Kant's argument is restricted to the contingent beings and only proves "that the proposition there exists an object to which  $C$  applies is logically equivalent to there exists an object to which  $C^E$  applies; hence, if either is contingent, so is the other" (Plantinga 1966, 545). More precisely, were Anselm's ontological argument construed by

adding existence to a concept which “has application contingently if at all”, then Kant’s objection would become relevant to Anselm’s argument. Plantinga claims that Anselm’s argument is not based on such a premise but on the possibility of the existence of the necessary existential propositions, particularly on the assumption that “God exists” is a necessary proposition, and that Kant’s objection falls short of disproving any of these claims (Plantinga 1966, 546).

In his paper “The Ontological Proof: Kant’s Objections, Plantinga’s Reply”, Gregory Robson suggests three strategies to contest Plantinga’s argument from irrelevance against Kant’s objection. As a first strategy, one can dispute Plantinga’s reception of Anselm’s argument, by claiming that existence is indeed labelled a predicate in the original argument. Alternatively, one can reject the assertion that Kant’s objection is limited to the contingent propositions and show how it actually applies also to necessary existential propositions. As a third option, one can argue “that Anselm’s ontological proof relies unavoidably on at least one premise which is true contingently if true at all” (Robson 2012, 160). I will appeal to the first two strategies to show that Plantinga’s charge from irrelevance to Kant’s objection is not justified, arguing that Plantinga’s formulations of Anselm’s argument, both classical and modal versions, employ an ambiguous notion of existence and that Kant’s objection to the argument as well as his notion of existence have been conceptualised by Plantinga in an inaccurate way.

### **3. The Relevance of Kant’s Objection to Plantinga’s Classical Formulation of the Ontological Argument**

Let me start with Plantinga’s formulation of the ontological argument in the classical way, namely, “in Anselm’s own terms as much as possible”, which is as follows:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) God exists in the understanding but not in reality.  
(assumption for reductio)
- (2) Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone. (premise)
- (3) A being having all of God’s properties plus existence in reality can be conceived. (premise)

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<sup>1</sup> However, I do not mean to suggest that Plantinga’s formulation is the most accurate formulation of Anselm’s own argument. There might be a novel and stronger formulation of his argument based on the exploration of the notion of existence in Anselm in an alternative way. For such an alternative exploration of his notion of existence, see Ünügür Tabur (2023, ch. 1).

(4) A being having all of God's properties plus existence in reality is greater than God. (from 1 and 2)

(5) A being greater than God can be conceived. (3, 4)

(6) It is false that a being greater than God can be conceived (by definition of 'God')

[...]

(7) Hence, it is false that God exists in the understanding but not in reality. (1-6 *reductio ad absurdum*)

It follows that if God exists in the understanding, He also exists in reality; but clearly enough He does exist in the understanding, as even the fool will testify; therefore, He exists in reality as well. (Plantinga 1977, 87-88)

Apparently, Anselm's argument is an argument of the kind *reductio ad absurdum*, which derives its conclusion from the absurdity of the denial of GB's existence (or that of God) in reality once its existence is confirmed in the mind. But what is the nature of this confirmation in the mind? Should we understand the notion of GB without (minus) his existence in reality from God's existence *in intellectu*, or should his existence in reality be included in the very concept? If the latter, should existence in reality be understood as a property that adds some perfection to the notion of GB? Plantinga seems to avoid referring to existence in reality as a property in the argument and leaves the notion of existence in premises (3) and (4) ambiguous by using the phrase "plus existence" and without explaining in which way existence in reality relates to the very concept. Even though Plantinga does not explicitly allude to existence as a property in the ontological argument, it seems that his classical formulation of the argument is committed to the assumption that existence is a great making property and Kant's objection aims to illustrate this commitment. Before introducing my argument in favour of the claim in question, Chris Heathwood's similar attempt to show this commitment with his analysis of the Anselmian notions of existence in understanding and existence in reality in the light of Meinongianism is worth noting.

In his article "The relevance of Kant's objection to Anselm's ontological argument", Heathwood argues that Anselm's notion of existence concerning the ontological argument is to be best understood in Meinongian terms. Accordingly, one, as Meinong suggests, needs to presume the nonexistent objects, namely, the objects that exist only in the understanding in order to refer to beings which lack existence in reality (negative existentials). This, in turn, commits one to two realms of existence, namely, existence *in intellectu* and *in re*, and the distinguishing remark of the objects belonging to these two realms is that the property of



“existence in reality” is not possessed by the objects of the former realm. For instance, we can conceive of Hamlet with all required properties to render it a whole concept as a nonexistent being. But had it existed in reality, it would have differed from its pure or fictional concept in terms of becoming a real object because “We do make an addition to a thing when we further declare that the thing *is*” (Heathwood 2011, 354). Similarly, when we are talking about GB as in the understanding and GB in reality, we are referring to two separate objects, one as lacking the property of existence and the other as having it. Therefore, as Heathwood concludes, Anselm “needs Meinongianism—or some theory relevantly like it” and should assume that existence is a real predicate to ground his ontological argument on the distinction between existence *in intellectu* and existence *in re*, which in turn renders his argument susceptible to Kant’s objection (Heathwood 2011, 354).

I agree with Heathwood’s conclusion that Anselm’s argument, as formulated by Plantinga, must presume existence as a real predicate, however, his appeal to a Meinongian argument in doing so requires a further analysis. First of all, it might be understandable that the objects of the realm of nonexistence are distinguished from the objects of the existential realm by the property of existence in reality insofar as the former are fictional entities. However, can we make a similar distinction between the real objects and their very concepts? Can we say, for instance, that the content of the whole concept of Socrates with all the properties that he exemplifies in the actual world differs from the content of the actual Socrates in that Socrates’ existence adds another property to the content of its concept? If they differ from each other this way, can we refer to actual Socrates by the concept of Socrates?

It seems to me that Plantinga’s formulation confronts a dilemma at this point. If, on the one hand, it presumes existence to be a real predicate, then we cannot refer to actual GB with the concept of GB. This, in turn, would mean that we actually cannot conceive of a being than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought since the “plus existence” part is not included in the content of the concept but only in the content of the object. Let’s call this *the reference problem*. If, on the other hand, existence is not a real property, then what makes GB in reality greater than GB *in intellectu* cannot be included in the content of the latter since otherwise GB in reality would not be greater than GB *in intellectu*. This would lead us again to the reference problem. So, Plantinga needs to offer an alternative way of understanding of the phrase “plus existence” in order to avoid the reference problem. His appeal to the possible worlds semantics in re-formulating the second premise might be considered as such an attempt. It should be

reiterated that Plantinga aims to show that *God exists* is a necessary existential proposition by appealing to the possible worlds semantics, and that the ontological argument, having this proposition as an essential premise, is not subject to Kant's objection.

Plantinga's analysis of the ontological argument with respect to the notion of existence occurs in three steps. The first step concerns the weak claim that GB's existence is possible in at least some possible world, the latter two steps are germane to the modal version of the argument. In the first step, he reformulates the second premise as that GB's existence is greater than any other being at least in some possible world as follows:

(2') For any being  $x$  and world  $W$ , if  $x$  does not exist in  $W$ , then there is a world  $W'$  such that the greatness of  $x$  in  $W'$  exceeds the greatness of  $x$  in  $W$ . (Plantinga 1977, 99)

According to (2'), the degree of greatness of any being in a possible world in which it exists exceeds its degree of greatness in any possible world in which it does not exist. As applied to the ontological argument, this premise, as Plantinga argues, does not render the argument conclusive for deducing GB's nonexistence in the actual world without begging the question. Let's suppose that there is a possible world  $W1$  where the property of "having an unsurpassable degree of greatness" is exemplified. This would only entail that "there is a possible being whose greatness exceeds that enjoyed by the greatest possible being in the actual world—where, for all we know, its greatness is not at a maximum" and one cannot claim that the world where the property of "having an unsurpassable degree of greatness" is exemplified is the actual world without already presuming God's existence in the actual world (Plantinga 1977, 101-102). So, for Plantinga, this version of the argument does not succeed. Before introducing Plantinga's modal analysis of the argument, a few remarks concerning Plantinga's first step are due.

It seems to me that Plantinga's rejection of his classical formulation of the argument actually involves a serious problem. Plantinga could be credited for his claim that the degree of a being which exists in a possible world is greater than its degree in any possible world that it does not exist since it enjoys a higher degree of reality. By the same token, however, he needs to presume that the degree of a being which exists in the actual world is greater than its degree in any possible world that it exists given that it is actualised with all its properties and enjoys a greater degree of reality in comparison. So, any being which exemplifies the property of "having an unsurpassable degree of greatness" in any possible world would be less

great than the being that exemplifies it in the actual world. In other words, the concept of that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-thought could not be exemplified in any possible world unless it is exemplified in the actual world.<sup>2</sup> So, either the possibility of exemplification of the concept of GB entails its exemplification in the actual world, or the concept involves contradiction according to possible worlds formulation in question. This brings us back to the very point of Kant's objection to the ontological argument, namely, that the concept of GB does not entail its actual existence but rather it must presume it by involving a tautology.

One might get confused in associating Kant's tautology charge with his dictum that existence does not add anything to the concept of an object, nor does it enlarge the concept. Such a confusion is mainly caused by a false interpretation of Kant's understanding of existence.<sup>3</sup> The false interpretation in question originates in a prevalent mistake in terms of not noticing Kant's distinction between being (*Sein*) and existence in reality (*Dasein*). It is true that Kant disregards *Sein* as a real predicate insofar as it is a logical predicate, however, he refers to *Dasein* as the determination of the object in reality and as a real predicate which enlarges the concept:

Anything one likes can serve as a logical predicate, even the subject can be predicated of itself; for logic abstracts from every content but the determination is a predicate, which goes beyond the concept of the subject and enlarges it. Thus, it must not be included in its reality (...). For with actuality the object is not merely included in my concept analytically, but adds synthetically to my concept (which is a determination of my state); yet the hundred dollars themselves that I am thinking of are not in the least increased through this being outside my concept. (Kant 1998, 567)

In analysing Kant's objection, the controversial point alludes to understanding what it means for a predicate to enlarge a concept. From the passages above, it is clear that this enlargement does not occur by adding anything to the content of the concept. The enlargement of a concept is about going beyond the content of the concept that exists merely in the mind in the way that the concept goes beyond its abstracted mental content and becomes the object of one's experience. In other words, a concept

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<sup>2</sup> An objection can be raised to this conclusion by the modal realist who takes all possible worlds to be as real as the actual world. But the analysis of this claim is not within the scope of the present paper.

<sup>3</sup> For the alternative views that take Kant to refer to "existence *in re*" as a real predicate, see Vick (1970) and Campbell (1974). For the interpretation of Kant's notion of existence as a second-order property, see Everitt (1995).

exceeds its analytical content and becomes the subject of a synthetic judgement. So, his objection is then to be understood as follows. Existence enlarges the concept in that it enables the mind to acquire a new synthetic cognition on the concept's external existence. To say that GB exists is an analytic proposition would mean that the conceiving of the concept of GB incorporates this synthetic cognition of its existence and this could be in either of the following ways: either "the thought that is in you must be the thing itself" or the possibility of the concept is established on the external existence of the concept which "nothing is but a miserable tautology" (Kant 1988, 566) as illustrated in relation to the reference problem in the analysis of Plantinga's first formulation of the ontological argument above.

#### **4. The Relevance of Kant's Objection to the Modal Ontological Argument**

Does Kant's objection also apply to the two modal versions of the ontological arguments, namely, the version proposed by Norman Malcolm and the one proposed by Plantinga? These philosophers claim that the modal version of the argument avoids Kant's objection insofar as it is not committed to the idea that existence is a predicate but appeals to the necessity of existence in different ways. In his article "Anselm's Ontological Arguments", Norman Malcom identifies two versions of the ontological argument in Anselm's *Proslogion*. The first version considers existence as a predicate whereas the second version labels necessary existence a perfection in the ontological argument. According to the second version of the ontological argument, the concept of a being "than-which-no-greater-can-be-thought" implies the logical impossibility of its nonexistence or its necessary existence. As Malcolm puts it:

Anselm is maintaining in the remarks last quoted, not that existence is a perfection, but that the logical impossibility of nonexistence is a perfection. In other words, necessary existence is a perfection. (Malcolm 1960, 46)

If God, a being a greater than which cannot be conceived, does not exist then He cannot come into existence. For if He did He would either have been caused to come into existence or have happened to come into existence, and in either case He would be a limited being, which by our conception of Him He is not. Since He cannot come into existence, if He does not exist His existence is impossible. If He does exist He cannot have come into existence (for the reasons given), nor can He cease to exist,

for nothing could cause Him to cease to exist nor could it just happen that He ceased to exist. So if God exists His existence is necessary. Thus God's existence is either impossible or necessary. It can be the former only if the concept of such a being is self-contradictory or in some way logically absurd. Assuming that this is not so, it follows that He necessarily exists. (Malcolm 1960, 49-50)

In his argument, Malcolm asserts that the impossibility of God's becoming into existence by another cause entails either the impossibility of his nonexistence or the impossibility of his existence. Since the latter option is excluded by the conceivability of the concept of God as GB, he concludes that God exists necessarily. It is important to note that Malcom regards necessary existence as a great-making property. This being so, his argument amounts to the claim that the property of being uncaused in existence, namely, the property of necessary existence must be possessed by GB. The conceivability of GB as having the property of necessary existence entails its exemplification in at least some possible world. Since the necessity of a being in a possible world entails its necessity in all other worlds, God exists in all possible worlds, including the actual world.

Plantinga claims to identify one annoying flaw in Malcolm's argument. He agrees that the modal ontological argument proves existence of God in all possible worlds formulated in the way Malcolm does, however, it falls short of proving such a being's perfection in every possible world. That is, it could well be possible that God exists in world *W*1 as the greatest possible being whose greatness is not exceeded by any other being in any other possible world, nevertheless, this does not entail that it exists as the greatest possible being in all other worlds.

To clarify his point, Plantinga makes a distinction between maximal excellence and maximal greatness. Accordingly, a being's excellence "depends only upon the properties it has in *W*", whereas "its greatness in *W* depends upon these properties but also upon what it is like in other worlds" (Plantinga 1977, 107). So, Plantinga restates the argument based on the premise that a being must possess maximal excellence, namely, omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfections, in every possible world in order to have maximal greatness in a possible world. Since a being that has maximal greatness is conceivable, it must exist in some possible world. More precisely, its existence in all possible worlds, including the actual world, is a prerequisite for its existence in some possible world. Thus, the possibility of a maximally great being entails the necessary existence of a maximally excellent being in every possible world.

For Plantinga, his modal version of the ontological argument is not subject to Kant's objection. However, it seems to me that his modal version of the argument encounters the same problem as that of the non-modal version, by making the possibility of the concept of GB conditional on its exemplification in the actual world. In other words, the argument does not prove GB's existence in the actual world drawing on its possibility or its exemplification in some possible world but establishes the possibility of the concept of GB on its exemplification in the actual world. This is one of the main flaws of the argument that Kant points toward by his objection. Let me elaborate on Plantinga's employment of the notion of existence in his formulation of the ontological argument in order to better understand Kant's point.

In his argument, Plantinga appears to consider existence as an existential quantifier and his argument can be stated in terms of predicate logic as follows:

$$(i) \Diamond(\exists x)Gx \rightarrow \Box(\exists x)Gx$$

(i) is to be read as that if the maximally greatest being's exemplification is possible in some possible world, then it must exist in all possible worlds or it exists necessarily.

$$(ii) \Diamond(\exists x)Gx$$

(ii) is the premise that shows that the concept of GB must be exemplified in some possible world given that it is a conceivable concept in terms of not involving any contradiction.

$$(iii) \Box(\exists x)Gx$$

(iii) follows *modus ponens* from (i) and (ii).

Kant's objection, as suggested above, aims to show that the argument is actually based on a reversed premise:

$$(i') \Box(\exists x)Gx \rightarrow \Diamond(\exists x)Gx$$

(i') means that the possibility of existence of the maximally great being in some possible world depends on the condition that it exists in every possible world as having maximal excellence.

What is perplexing here is associated again with the reference problem. What does the concept *G* refer to when considered apart from the

existential quantifier? In other words, can it refer to the maximally great being? It seems rather that the whole phrase that “ $\Box(\exists x)Gx$ ” should both refer to the content of the concept of the maximally great being and to the content of its object. Otherwise, the content of the concept would be less great than the content of the object and the modal ontological argument would fail. But if they overlap this way—and if it is ever possible to incorporate the existential quantifier in the content of a concept—, then we have nothing but a mere tautology.

To avoid this problem, one may regard necessary existence as a first-order property included in the concept of the maximally great being. How can this then be reconciled with Plantinga’s line of argument? In order to avoid the tautology mentioned above, one cannot start the argument with the possibility of the maximally *great* being, but rather should start with the possibility of maximally *excellent* being with the property of necessary existence, then prove that once the maximally *excellent* being exists in a possible world, it must exist in all possible worlds, not the other way round. Plantinga’s argument then encounters the objection that he directs at Malcolm’s line of reasoning, namely, the objection that the exemplification of the maximal excellence with the property of necessary existence by G does not entail that G has the maximal excellence in all possible worlds.

Let us assume that the existence of a maximally excellent being with the property of necessary existence in a possible world entails G’s existence in every possible world with the exact maximal excellence without any further argument. Even this assumption would not suffice for the success of the argument due to two reasons. First, this only seems to push the reference problem one step further. Consider the content of the concept of the maximally excellent being with the property of necessary existence as  $G^N$  and its necessary existence in all possible worlds as  $\Box(\exists x)G^N$ . For the argument to succeed,  $\Box(\exists x)G^Nx$  must include more perfection in terms of involving more reality as the greatest possible being than its mere concept  $G^N$ . Then, it would be problematic to say that the content of both is identical with each other.

The second problem concerns a significant point that Plantinga seems to miss in his evaluation of Malcolm’s argument. As argued previously, the existence of a being in the actual world encompasses more reality and therefore more perfection compared to its mere existence in any other possible world. In this case, it cannot be possible, according to Anselmian line of thinking, that the maximal excellence is exemplified in a possible world in that it could not be exceeded by any other being in any other

world. This is because the concept would become incoherent given that if it were exemplified in the actual world, it would have a higher degree of greatness, and we could conceive of a being which is greater than the being that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-thought. Similarly, Plantinga's line of reasoning involves the problem that the maximally excellent being with the property of necessary existence would have a higher degree of excellence in the actual world compared to its existence in all other possible worlds. So, the exemplification of the concept of GB in the actual world should involve more excellence than its exemplification in any other possible worlds, and GB in any possible world *W1* cannot be identical to GB in the actual world *W* in terms of excellence.

So, the ambiguity in the use of the notion of the existence seems to enable the modal ontological argument to avoid Kant's objection, however, a closer examination of the premises reveals the problematic nature of the argument and the relevance of Kant's objection also to the modal versions. The aim of this paper is not to completely discredit the ontological argument for God's existence. It is rather to show that the problematic use of the notion of existence is the reason for the failure of the argument and to prepare the basis for an alternative exploration of the notion of existence based on Avicenna's notion of existence and for the revision of the ontological argument for God's existence in the light of it.

## **5. Avicenna's Exploration of the Necessary Existence as an Alternative Ground for the Ontological Argument**

So far, a thorough analysis of the two issues, namely the reference problem and the tautology charge, that arise from Kant's objection to the ontological argument based on his dictum that "existence cannot be a predicate" has been given. It has been argued that Kant's objection is relevant to the three versions of the ontological arguments, namely, the classical argument as formulated by Plantinga and the modal arguments proposed by Malcolm and Plantinga, since all these three versions encounter either the reference problem or the tautology charge for not providing a proper understanding of the notion of existence as a ground for the argument.

The main problem of their line of reasoning is their inability to show how the concept/essence of GB can be associated with the actual existence of GB as a result of an entailment relation. This seems to be due to the unquestionably accepted view that essence and existence distinction functions in the same way for all beings in that all beings have an essence



that is conceptually separable from their existence, i.e., existence is an addition to the essence, either as a contingent addition or a necessary addition. As Kant rightly points out, existential statements cannot be more than synthetical judgements in such a system where essence and existence are separable entities.

At this point, Avicenna's analysis of the notion of existence might afford the proponent of the ontological argument an alternative ground which could possibly avoid Kant's objection. Similar to Kant, Avicenna regards the existential statements concerning beings with an essence separable from their existence as contingent or synthetic judgements. However, he goes beyond his semantic distinction concerning essence and existence with his modal analysis of existence as an ontological grounding for his metaphysics in that he dismisses any sort of essence for the Necessary Existent. In the following, an outline of Avicenna's essence-existence distinction will be given in association with the problems concerning the ontological argument. My attempt will be restricted to pointing toward an alternative grounding for a possible reformulation of the ontological argument since the space does not allow for providing a full examination of the possibility of a reformulation of the ontological argument.

It is not unusual that Avicenna's exploration of the notion of the Necessary Existent has been associated with the ontological argument, particularly with the modal ontological argument.<sup>4</sup> Avicenna's two kinds of divisions concerning existence and thingness constitute the very basis for grounding the ontological argument in his metaphysics. The first division is the essence-existence division in which Avicenna is taken to be the first philosopher to distinguish between existence *in intellectu* and existence *in re*, namely between essence and existence, of a being in an explicit way. The second division is his modal division as necessary, possible, and impossible.

In *The Metaphysics of the Healing* 1.5, Avicenna identifies three notions which are the primitive and undefined notions comprehended immediately by our minds, being the transcendental condition of our cognitive comprehension and judgments. These notions are "the existent", "the thing", and "the necessary". For Avicenna, these terms are undefinable and any attempt of definition would involve a circularity since definitions are meant to "make an unknown thing known" through better known concepts and there can be nothing better known than these notions; nevertheless, he admits that some indications can draw our

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Morewedge (1980), Johnson (1984), and Zarepour (2022).

attention to them or bring them to mind through the use of a name or a sign which, in itself, may be less known than [the principles] but which, for some cause or circumstance, happens to be more obvious in its signification. (Avicenna 2005, 28)

In this sense, a thing is indicated as something “about which it is valid to give an informative statement”, “is a reality by virtue of which it is what it is”, or “the quiddity” (Avicenna 2005, 23-24). So, Avicenna's notion of thingness can be said to correspond to the intensionality of objects in the contemporary language.

On the other hand, the existent seems to be employed in reference to extensionality, either in association with a mentally existing thing or an externally existing thing. The mental existence is called “proper existence” and the external existence is called “affirmative existence” (Avicenna 2005, 24). Existence is a necessary concomitant of thingness, that is, thingness necessarily entails either mental or external existence “because the thing exists either in the concrete or in the estimative [faculty] and the intellect” (Avicenna 2005, 24). For instance, “triangular” signifies a thing in terms of being intensional, namely, having a definition and it is necessarily accompanied by either a mental or an external reference. So, Avicenna's exploration of thingness and existence establishes the ground for his essence-existence distinction.

The essence-existence division seems to concern a semantic distinction and raises the question of the metaphysical grounding as to whether essence precedes existence, or vice versa. Avicenna introduces the modal division of being right after his semantical analysis concerning essence and existence, and starts dealing with the metaphysical grounding problem. His appeal to a modal analysis for the metaphysical grounding is about his association of the existent beings that are compound of an essence and existence with possibility and the existent in its purest form/*existence as such* with necessity.

His modal analysis begins with a rebuttal of the ancient definition of the modal terms. He contests it in terms of being circular, where each modal term is defined with a reference to one another; possibility defined as being not necessary or not impossible in existence, necessary as whose nonexistence is impossible, and impossible as being necessarily non-existent. In accordance with his inclusion of the term “necessary” among the primitive notions along with the thing and the existent, Avicenna attempts to break the circularity concerning the definition of the modal terms as well as to provide a metaphysical grounding in general. In doing

so, he identifies necessity as “the one with the highest claim to be first conceived” among others in that “the necessary points to the assuredness of existence” and that “existence being better known than nonexistence” (Avicenna 2005, 28).

At this point, it is important to understand how Avicenna infers the assuredness of existence or necessity of existence by a conceptual analysis. First of all, Avicenna disregards existence as a genus, i.e., he does not include it under any of the ten Aristotelian categories.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, he considers external existence as accidentally occurring to those beings whose essence can be separated from their existence. Accordingly, existence cannot refer to a first-order property of things included in their quiddity or itself cannot be a quiddity. If we take existence to be a quiddity, then the quiddity of existence must be considered distinct from the existence based on the distinctive characteristic of quiddities. Accordingly, to realise the quiddity of existence, we will need existence prior and externally occurring to this quiddity. This implies a contradiction since the quiddity of existence is realised after the existence of existence. In this case, existence becomes additional to its quiddity and the quiddity in question cannot signify the existence. The what-ness of existence cannot be understood through a separate quiddity, for what we refer to with existence is nothing other than existence as such.

How existence as such is then identical with the necessary existence? Beings with an essence apart from their existence (in reality) are given existence externally in that existence is accidental to their meaning/thingness. So, for Avicenna, having a quiddity necessitates to be given existence/realised in the external world by some external thing and implies contingency (Avicenna 2005, 31). For instance, the existence of Socrates is prioritised by his quiddity, namely humanity. Humanity is a cause of the existence of Socrates in the sense that Socrates is individualised according to this quiddity by another being by being given existence. Hence, for Avicenna, if there is a being which has a quiddity, then it must be posterior to another being. Similarly, if the latter possesses a quiddity as well, the same reasoning applies to it, too. Such beings which

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotle does not ultimately distinguish between the essence and existence of a being, that is, for him, a thing's existence is its essence. So, the properties included in categories depend ultimately on existing individuals. This also relates to the very Kantian point that we do not add anything to the essence by stating that it exists. However, Avicenna considers categories independent of existing individuals and as mental entities without any existential implication. Existence is given externally to the essences and beyond categories. Giving an external status to existence beyond categories, and thus to the ultimate source of everything else, Avicenna states God (the Necessary Existent) also beyond the categories and, unlike Aristotle does not refer to him among substances (see Avicenna 1984, 54-55; see also Kukkonen 2012, 49-50; Back 1987, 364).

have existence additional to their essence cannot be the source of their existence and must be either ontologically or temporally posterior to an existent being as their cause given that the ultimate source of existence cannot be posterior to existence. So, existence as such entails necessity as its concomitant, being devoid of any essence and being the very transcendental condition of any categorical distinction such as mentally existent beings and externally existent beings. In these terms, existence as such corresponds to necessary existence. Since existence as such must be an external reality, necessary existence refers to the Necessary Existent for Avicenna.

Similar to the notion of existence, Avicenna does not regard necessity as a common quiddity or genus. For, otherwise, we would have to accept either that the necessity is caused by some existent thing or that necessity, as a common quiddity, is the cause of its existence. For Avicenna, the necessity cannot be caused since had it been caused, then it would not be called a necessity but be called contingency. This is because if something precedes absolute necessity, then it should be something either contingent or necessary. If this is something contingent, then necessity is caused by something contingent, which renders it contingent as well. That is, we cannot ascribe necessity to it anymore. Therefore, the former option is invalid. The second option, which suggests that absolute necessity is a common quiddity of the Necessary Existent, is also invalid for him, for he argues that a common quiddity cannot be realised or come into existence without the Necessary Existent itself. If we take the necessary existence to be a common essence, then it needs the Necessary Existent to be realised and to gain existence *in re*. To put it differently, if absolute necessity is caused by something necessary, then the quiddity of necessity comes posterior to its exemplification, that is, in order to individuate its quiddity, the Necessary Existent must exist prior to its quiddity, which is contradictory (Avicenna 2005, 274-276). Therefore, Avicenna concludes that “there is no quiddity for the Necessary Existent other than its being the Necessary Existent” which is its “thatness [Inniyya]”<sup>6</sup> (Avicenna 2005, 276).

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<sup>6</sup> It might sound confusing that while denying any quiddity to God, Avicenna claims that the Necessary Existent's quiddity is its thatness. It seems that he does not associate any quiddity to God in reference to an abstracted mental entity. But as the referent of the term “the Necessary Existent” and as its “whatness”, Avicenna denotes its “thatness”, suggesting that “whatness” and “thatness” are conceptually inseparable for the Necessary Existent. In the light of the discussion offered above, it is contradictory to assume any inseparable quiddity for the Necessary Existent. For a discussion whether for Avicenna, the Necessary Existent has an inseparable quiddity or does not have any quiddity at all, see Zarepour (2022, 18-24).

In the light of the analysis of Avicenna's notion of existence above, we can now better understand the problems of the three versions of the ontological argument presented in this paper. The first issue that Avicenna would raise against the ontological arguments in question would be related to the essence-existence distinction. He would object to the line of reasoning which starts with an essential definition of GB and thereby derives GB's actual existence. For Avicenna, attributing an essential definition to GB would render this being a contingent being in that its essence would be in need of an external being to be realised in the external world. Existence *in re* would then become an accident, an addition to the very concept of GB, regardless of whether it is a property or not. According to Avicenna's metaphysics, existence cannot be a derivative concept, but it should precede everything else as the transcendental condition of our cognition.

Secondly, the ontological arguments involve an unjustified leap from the concept of GB to its actual existence in terms of failing to show how an essence would necessarily entail its existence *in re*. In other words, the gap between the essence and the actual existence remains unbridged. This is because concepts consist of properties whose main characteristic is "to be exemplified" and this characteristic can be realised only by an existent being which exemplifies the property in question. So, existence *in re* is not included in the concept as a property, rather it is the ground on which a concept/property becomes individualised. This implicit presumption is the reason why the ontological arguments in question are rendered tautological, namely, that the possibility of a maximally great being does not indeed entail its necessary actual existence, but the other way round; the possibility of a maximally great being must presume its necessary existence as argued previously.

Thirdly, thinking of an essence belonging to the Necessary Existent as a starter would also bring about the reference problem in Avicenna's system even if this essence is taken only to be "necessary existence". For, as argued above, this distinction entails that the essence of "necessary existence" is realised by an external being which would in turn be the Necessary Existent itself, by implying that the Necessary Existent existed before its essence is realised and that the Necessary Existent cannot be referred to by the concept "necessary existence". Thus, one needs to offer a reverse formulation of the ontological argument that first proves the necessity of existence as such through a conceptual analysis of the notion of existence as Avicenna does and then derive the perfections concomitantly by showing that the necessity of existence is the very ontological ground of whatever attaches to it.

So, the three formulations of the ontological argument included in this article seem to fail to provide a sound *a priori* proof for God's existence due to their lack of a clear notion of existence. On the one hand, Plantinga's classical formulation and Malcolm's modal version are committed to essence-existence distinction for God and consider "existence" or "necessary existence" as occurring to God's essence as a "plus" something. This brings about the reference problem between the content of the concept of GB and the content of its object. To avoid this, GB's (necessary) existence must be presumed within the content of the concept of GB, but it is hard to make sense how a concept can incorporate existence as a property unless what is meant by that is a mere tautology of presuming the actual existence of GB.

On the other hand, Plantinga's modal ontological argument is also committed to a tautology. In principle, the coherency of the concept of maximal excellence is supposed to entail its necessary exemplification in all possible worlds. However, the argument only demonstrates that this concept becomes a coherent concept only through the existence of a necessary being in all possible worlds that exemplifies maximal greatness. So, in order to have a sound argument, the necessary existence of this being must be proven first as the ontological grounding of the maximally great properties, namely, a reverse deduction from the necessary existent to its excellence must be established to avoid the tautology charge.<sup>7</sup>

Avicenna's line of modal reasoning as an ontological grounding with a reference to his semantic distinction between essence and existence may provide an alternative basis for reformulating the ontological argument in a way that it avoids Kant's objection. Even though it is not within the scope of this paper to offer such a reformulation, the issues that have been discussed throughout the paper might initiate new insights to the ontological argument in the light of our analysis of Avicenna's notion of existence. In offering any reformulation of the ontological argument by an appeal to Avicenna's metaphysical system, it is important to take into account the reservations that it might bring about, such as the problem whether the notion of the Necessary Existent can be identical with the theistic notion of the divine perfect being.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of how Avicenna's account solves the grounding problem of divine attributes without being committed to circularity or bootstrapping, see Ünügür Tabur (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Morewedge argues that Avicenna's notion of the Necessary Existent does not refer to the traditional theistic notion of God as the perfect being. For a full articulation of this issue, see Morewedge (1970).

## Acknowledgments

I sincerely thank to Dr. Christina Schneider for her expertise and insightful discussion on the ontological argument as well as Dr. Şeyma Yazıcı and the referees for their helpful comments on the manuscript.

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