THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT REVISITED

THE ontological argument has often been criticized on the grounds that it mistakenly supposes "exists" to be a predicate. I am going to argue (1) that the way in which this criticism is usually presented is faulty, (2) that these faults result from overlooking certain basic features of the concept of existence, and (3) that when these features are fully taken into account, new and sounder reasons can be given for denying that "exists" is a predicate and for rejecting the ontological argument. In the first section I shall present the traditional kind of criticism in what I take to be its strongest form; in the second, I shall try to show that it does not hold up; in the third I shall attempt to enrich it so as to avoid those defects.[1]

I

Undoubtedly the ontological argument does depend on using "exists" as a predicate.

> . . . each time I happen to think of a first and sovereign being, and to draw, so to speak, the idea of him from the store house of the mind, I am necessitated to *attribute* to him all kinds of perfections, though I may not then enumerate them all, nor think of each of them in particular. And this necessity is sufficient, as soon as I discover that *existence is a perfection*, to cause me to infer the existence of this first and sovereign being: just as it is not necessary that I should ever imagine any triangle, but whenever I am desirous of considering a rectilineal figure composed of only three angles, it is absolutely

[1] It may be helpful to relate this essay to Professor Norman Malcolm's very interesting article, "Anselm's Ontological Arguments," which recently appeared in the *Review* (LXIX, 1960, 41-62). There Malcolm distinguishes two different arguments in Anselm's *Proslogion*. My treatment of Anselm is restricted to what Malcolm calls the first argument, and is concerned with the sort of considerations which are commonly used in rejecting it. About what Malcolm calls the second argument, I have nothing to say in this essay. My opinion is that the second argument is ultimately dependent on the first, but that is a long story.

necessary to *attribute* those *properties* to it from which it is correctly inferred that its three angles are not greater than two right angles. . .[2]

It is clear that Descartes is assuming a logical parallel between "A triangle has angles equal to two right angles" and "A perfect being exists."[3] There is no conceivable alternative to the former, because having its angles equal to two right angles is part of what we mean by a triangle, or at least follows from part of what we mean by a triangle. Likewise there is no conceivable alternative to predicating "exists" of a perfect being, since existing is part of what we mean by a perfect being (existence is a perfection). In both cases we simply attribute to the entity one of the properties which serve as a necessary condition of its being the thing it is. Without this logical parallel the principle from which Descartes starts—". . . because I can draw from my thought the idea of an object, it follows that all I clearly and distinctly apprehend to pertain to this object, does in truth belong to it"[4]—would have no application to the existence of God.

What reasons are there to deny that "exists" is a predicate? Where the support for this denial goes beyond pious asseveration, which is less often than one would like to think, it usually takes the form of pointing out logical differences between admitted subject-predicate statements and statements which differ from these only in the substitution of "exists" for the predicate.[5] But it is never shown that these differences are such as to prevent "exists" from being a predicate, rather than making it a very special sort of predicate, as a stubborn Cartesian might insist. After all, there are very great logical differences between admitted subject-predicate statements, too. To remedy this deficiency, it is necessary to exhibit the nature of predication. Until we have

[2] R. Descartes, *Meditation V*, trans. J. Veitch (La Salle, Illinois, 1937), pp. 79-80. Italics mine.

[3] Of course it may be doubted that the former is logically necessary, or at least that "the predicate is contained in the subject." But since we are not at present concerned with mathematics, we can ignore this. It is enough that Descartes treats this statement as if the predicate were contained in the subject.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 77.

[5] For a good example of this, see G. E. Moore, "Is Existence a Predicate?," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. XV (1936). Reprinted in A. Flew (ed.), *Logic and Language* (Second Series; Oxford, 1953).

made explicit what it is to predicate, we are not likely to determine conclusively whether or not a given term is capable of being predicated. Now without going beyond the orbit of the traditional critique, I want to try to give it a stronger and more fundamental formulation than it usually receives. Only when the traditional criticism is stated in the strongest possible form will its basic defects be seen clearly.

I am incapable of giving, nor is it necessary for my purpose to give, an exhaustive analysis of predication. It will suffice to bring out one of its essential features. Before we can attach any predicate to anything ("round," "heavy," "in my pocket," "belongs to Jones," "difficult to understand"), we must presuppose that it exists. If we were not making that assumption we could not even raise the question whether a given predicate attaches to it. To predicate sweetness of the pie in the oven without presupposing that there is a pie in the oven would be as self-defeating as asking you to take the pie out of the oven, or asking you whether the pie in the oven is done, without that supposition. But we must put this point carefully. I can *deceitfully* say that the pie in the oven is sweet, knowing all along that there is no pie in the oven, just as I can deceitfully ask you to take it out, knowing there is none. Still, there is an important sense in which I am, even here, presupposing that there is a pie in the oven. This sense can be brought out as follows: one (logically) could not openly admit that *a* does not exist (or doubt, wonder, or express ignorance about whether *a* exists) and still predicate *P* of *a*. This would be logically impossible simply because in the face of this admission we would not (could not) interpret what the speaker says as predicating *P* of *a*. "There is no pie in the oven, and the pie in the oven is sweet" cannot be used to make a predication, though it might be used to propound a riddle, be ironical, or test one's voice.

On this basis it is easy to show that "exists" cannot be a predicate. If the existence of the subject must be presupposed before we can set about attaching (withholding, wondering whether to attach) any predicate to (from) it, we will always be too late either to apply or to withhold a predicate of existence. The application of such a predicate would simply repeat the

preliminary conditions for any predication. (Compare "I am speaking," "You are being spoken to.") And the denial of such a predicate would contradict the essential conditions of any predication. (Compare "I am not speaking," "You are not being spoken to.") In other words, on the predicative interpretation, any positive existential statement, for example, "A perfect tennis player exists," would be trivial. Since I must already have settled (or pretend to have settled) the existence of a perfect tennis player before I can say anything about him, going on to say that he exists would just be going over something which had already been completed behind the scenes. But obviously such an assertion is not trivial; it constitutes a substantive claim, whereas any negative existential ("A perfect tennis player does not exist") on the predicative interpretation would be self-defeating. If I first presuppose that a perfect tennis player exists and then go ahead to deny existence, I am taking away with one hand what was offered with the other. I am destroying an essential condition of what I set out to say. And equally obviously, not all negative existentials are self-defeating. We do sometimes succeed in denying the existence of something.[6]

The application of all this to the ontological argument is obvious. Descartes can get from the principle "Perfection implies existence" or "Existence is a perfection" to the conclusion he wants, "A perfect being exists," only by using that principle to show that existence must be predicated of a perfect being. But we can predicate, or refuse to predicate, anything of a perfect being, only if we purport to have already settled that there is a perfect being. However true it may be that being unmarried is contained in the notion of bachelorhood, I cannot conclude that it is necessarily true that the bachelor next door is unmarried, unless I have been assured that there is a bachelor next door.

[6] This argument has been presented by several recent writers, but without clearly exhibiting its dependence on the nature of predication. See C. D. Broad, *Religion, Philosophy, and Psychical Research* (London, 1953), pp. 182-183; John Wisdom, *Interpretation and Analysis* (London, 1931), p. 62; A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (2nd ed.; London, 1947), p. 43.

II

It is my contention that this line of criticism is vitiated by the neglect of important distinctions. The heart of the argument, let us remember, was the claim that any attempted predication of existence where positive would be trivial, and where negative would be self-defeating. I now wish to show that this is not always so. But first a note on procedure. It should be clear from the above that I side with Strawson against Russell in denying that "The *P* is *Q*" can be accurately translated by "There is one and only one *x* which is *P*, and anything which is *P* is *Q*"; the reason being that the former presupposes the first conjunct of the latter rather than explicitly asserts it. Nevertheless the triviality of (1A) "The *P* exists" can be most clearly exhibited by making the presupposition explicit and showing the redundancy of (2A) "There is one and only one *P* and it exists." And it would be true to say that the triviality of (1A) rests on the redundancy of (2A). In the same way the self-defeating character of (1B) "The *P* does not exist" could be said to rest on the contradictoriness of (2B) "There is one and only one *P*, and it does not exist." Since these more explicit models reveal more sharply the logical features in which we are interested, it will be more convenient, and perfectly harmless, to work with them, even if they are not strict synonyms of the ones in which we are ultimately interested.

A. My contention is that 2A-form statements are not always redundant, and that 2B-form statements are not always self-contradictory. To an ear dulled by the habitual blurring of distinctions in philosophical discourse, this may seem outrageous. But in fact plainly substantive statements of this form occur fairly often.

(A) There are centaurs in Greek mythology, but no such creatures exist.

(B) In many old legends there is a British king named Arthur who leads the British against the Saxons, and, according to some scholars, he really existed.

Lest it should be supposed that such statements depend on a

difference in meaning between "there is" and "exists," consider other examples which do not exhibit this terminological shift.

(C) That ghost exists only in your imagination. (It does not really exist.)

(D) Perfectly unselfish people exist only in literature. (No such people really exist.)[7]

In citing these sentences as counter-instances, I am so construing them that the phrases "in Greek mythology," "in literature," "in your imagination," and so forth, modify "there is" and "exists," thereby specifying what sort of existence is being asserted. On this interpretation, in uttering one of these sentences, one would be asserting that something has one mode of existence, and then denying that the same thing has another mode of existence. But this interpretation may be questioned. Why not read (A) like "There are kangaroos in Australia, but kangaroos do not exist in South America." No one would claim the latter to be of the 2B form. The prepositional phrases plainly belong with the specification of what is said to exist. It is kangaroos in Australia which we are saying there are, kangaroos in South America which we are saying there are not. Kangaroos *überhaupt* are not in the picture at all. If we adopt this sort of interpretation for our examples, they do no damage to the standard argument. Once we fully specify what is claimed to exist in each clause, it is plain that we are not really asserting and denying existence of the same thing.

But this alternative interpretation will not hold water. On this interpretation there is one and only one mode of existence, which things can be said to have in various places—Australia, Tahiti,

[7] In treating these sentences as of the same form as 2A and 2B, I am taking "there is" and "exists" to be roughly synonymous, wherever grammar allows the use of either. And the "one and only one" qualifier is not important for the present problem. Hence all the following sorts of statements can be counted as of the same form as 2B (and parallels could easily be constructed for 2A):

There are *P*'s .....,	but they do not exist .....
P's exist .....,	but they do not exist .....
A *P* exists .....,	but it does not exist .....
There is an *x* named "*P*" .,	but it does not exist .....
That *P* exists .....,	but it does not exist .....

or the Milky Way. But once we stretch the notion of place to include fiction, mythology, imagination, and the real world, it becomes very unclear what could be meant by the existence which could indifferently be exercised in these locales. We can understand one sort of existence being possessed either in Australia or Greenland, but that is because we are holding it constant to, say, real as opposed to fictional existence. Vary that, too, and with what are we left? I can say "There (really) is a key to this box" without saying where the key is, and I have told you something, though perhaps you would like to have fuller information. But if I say "Sea serpents exist," and leave it open whether I mean in mythology, in literature, in reality, or in my imagination, what have I told you? Have I excluded anything? Can I conceive of anything which would not exist in at least one of these "places"? It seems that I must, implicitly or explicitly, add one of these qualifications in order to get any assertion at all. This means that "in literature," "in reality," and so forth, are not independent of "exists" in the way "in my pocket" and "in Labrador" are. (This is the justification for denying that existence is a genus. To assign something to a genus without giving its species is to give real, though relatively abstract, information. The generic term stands on its own feet predicatively, whereas, as we have just seen, we must have in mind some specific mode of existence in order to get an assertion.) The supposition that "There are centaurs in Greek mythology, but they do not exist in reality" is properly analyzed as "$(\exists x)$ (x is a centaur in Greek mythology) and $\sim$ $(\exists x)$ (x is a centaur in reality)," breaks down through inability to give any interpretation to "$\exists$" which is common to both these occurrences.

Hence the standard argument against treating "exists" as a predicate collapses. If I can say, without redundancy, "There is in many old legends a British King named Arthur who fought against the Saxons, and the evidence is that he really existed," it would seem that I can just as well set up a subject on the presupposition of the first conjunct, and then, without triviality, predicate real existence of this subject. And if I can, without contradiction, say "There are centaurs in Greek mythology, but centaurs do not really exist," it would seem that I can presuppose

the first conjunct in setting up legendary centaurs as subjects of predication, and then, without self-stultification, deny that the predicate of real existence attaches to these subjects. The way is then open to regarding "King Arthur really existed" and "Centaurs do not really exist" as subject-predicate statements. We can use one mode of existence to set up the subject, and another mode of existence as the predicate. At least, once we recognize diverse modes of existence, the standard arguments are powerless to prevent this.

And this means that the ontological argument has not finally been disposed of. Granted different modes of existence, we can restate the argument in a form which is not open to the standard objections. We can get our subject of predication by presupposing the existence of a perfect being in some nonreal mode, where the existence is obvious. Then we can argue that an analysis of this being shows that it possesses the characteristic of real existence.

It is interesting that St. Anselm's version of the ontological argument (in his *Proslogium*) is explicitly in this form. The difference between Anselm and Descartes in this regard has been too little remarked. Instead of saying, with Descartes, that existence is contained in the idea of a perfect being, Anselm speaks of a being than which nothing greater can be conceived, which he initially supposes to have a certain kind of existence—existence in the understanding. He takes considerable pains to justify this presupposition.

> . . . the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God (Psalms xiv. 1). But, at any rate, this very fool, when he hears of this being of which I speak—a being than which nothing greater can be conceived—understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding; . . . . Hence even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For, when he hears of this, he understands it. And whatever is understood, exists in the understanding.

He can then raise the question of what can (or must) be attributed to this being; the argument is, of course, that real existence must, on pain of contradiction, be attributed to it.

> And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived,

cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater.

Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible.[8]

In this form the argument has recognized the principle that all predication presupposes the existence of a subject, and so is not subject to any attack based on this principle.

And yet we know something must be wrong. Else the perfect island, et al., return to haunt (or enchant) us.

B. Before giving my diagnosis I must take notice of a protest which, if heeded, would obviate the need for one. It may take many forms: "Being in literature is not existing in any sense." " 'Existing in legend' is just a way of talking about what people say when they repeat legends." "Since 'existing in the understanding' is just a misleading reformulation of 'have an idea of,' Anselm is not really different from Descartes."

So far as these protests simply amount to an *exclusion* of such phrases as "exists in your imagination" (perhaps on the grounds that only real existence is *real* existence), they can be safely ignored. But a more serious thesis may be concealed therein. It may be claimed that all other types of existence can be reduced to real existence, that we could say everything we ever want to say without employing such phrases. For example, instead of saying "There are centaurs in Greek mythology," we could do the same job by saying "In the recitation of their myths the ancient Greeks used a word or phrase synonymous with 'centaur.' " Similarly, "There were three flying saucers in my dream" can be replaced by "I dreamed about three flying saucers," or "In my dream it was as if I were seeing three flying saucers"; and "That ghost exists only in your imagination" becomes "You are just imagining a ghost." Similarly, "The perfect being exists in the understanding" will, when fumigated, become "We can form a concept of a perfect being," which may in turn be transformed

[8] St. Anselm, *Proslogium*, trans. by S. N. Deane (Chicago, 1939), ch. II.

into "We can learn how to use the phrase 'perfect being.' " In these replacements the only sort of existence which is asserted or presupposed is real existence.

Doubts could be expressed as to the feasibility of such a general reduction. For example, in "You are just imagining a ghost," is "a ghost" a referring phrase? And if it is, are we presupposing a nonreal mode of existence for a ghost? But even granted that it could be carried through, what bearing would it have on our present problem? Well, in a language which is stripped down in this way, the standard argument against the possibility of predicating existence would hold good, and for that reason the ontological argument could not be given a valid formulation in such a language. But that falls short of showing that in language as we have it the argument collapses. I am sure Anselm would be willing to settle for the validity of his argument in ordinary medieval Latin. But, says the reconstructionist, the languages are different only in form, not in content. This follows from the premise that everything sayable in the one is equally sayable in the other. Hence the fact that existence cannot be a predicate in the revised language shows that, despite appearances, it cannot be a predicate in ordinary language either. But there are two difficulties with this. (1) How do we know which way to read the equivalence? What if Anselm said, "The fact that existence can be used as a predicate in ordinary language shows that, despite appearances, it can be so used in the revised language"? (2) We have not explored all the complications involved in the claim that in each of the above pairs the one sentence can be used to say just what is said by the other. Once Anselm saw that in the second language he could not say that the most perfect being necessarily exists, he would have second thoughts about his admission that the two are equally rich. More generally, whenever any translation gets rid of some supposed metaphysical presupposition or implication, but otherwise preserves the meaning of the original, those who want to preserve this metaphysical concomitant, once they see what is going on, will refuse to admit the accuracy of the translation. But it is just such folk for whom the translation is designed. (Compare translating "Courage is a virtue" into "Anyone who is courageous is virtuous," in order

to get rid of universals; or "The fact that he took bribes is well known" into "Many people knew that he took bribes," in order to get rid of facts.)

These are special cases of ills which are endemic to reductionism. The apparent use of "exists" as a predicate, and its most famous offspring, the ontological argument, arose in language as we actually have it. It is in the course of using that language that we have fallen under the spell of this argument. The spell will not be broken by showing that the incantations could not be intoned in another language, however akin it may be in other respects. So long as we are under the spell, the fact that it gives no place to those incantations shows that it is not close enough. What we must do is to discover what, if anything, there is in language as we use it that prevents the use of "exists" as a predicate (and spikes the ontological argument). If that cannot be done, then the proposed revision is invalid as well as inept. If using "exists" as a predicate is possible in ordinary language, then any language in which this is not possible is not equivalent.[9]

III

What is wrong with predicating real existence of a perfect being which exists in the understanding? There are many predications which are plainly all right here. We can say of this being that it is infinite, wise, just, merciful, all-knowing, and so forth. But when we add "and really exists," something jars us; we are seized with logical vertigo. This, we want to say, is different. But can this feeling be justified? What is so different about it? Well, in all the other cases, we remained within the sphere of ideas or concepts, but when real existence is asserted we step outside

[9] If it could be shown that the rules of ordinary language are inconsistent on this point, that would alter the situation. In that case these rules would have to be altered in some way. But no one has shown that a reduction of fictional to real existence is needed to avoid inconsistency, or even unintelligibility. No one has shown that employing "exists" as we ordinarily do leads us into contradictions. The virtues which could be plausibly claimed for the reduction would be, rather, economy and the avoidance of possible confusions.

that sphere, and this cannot be done solely from an examination of its contents. We must look outside and see what is there. Dissection of what is in the understanding can never tell us what is in the real world, any more than analysis of my dreams will ever tell me which of their contents, if any, faithfully represent real objects (at least not without some dream theory which is itself partly based on evidence concerning real things), or any more than any literary analysis of the character of Achilles in the *Iliad* can determine whether this is a historical figure. To do this would mean lifting ourselves by our bootstraps, or unlocking a door by staring at the lock.

But, comes the inevitable rejoinder, this case is different. In general it is true that one cannot show that x really exists simply by analyzing its existence in the understanding. But here is the one case where this is possible. Here the nature of the being in the understanding is of such ontological richness as to burst its bonds; its inherent expansive power impels it across the boundary into real existence.

These metaphors get us nowhere. We cannot cross the border without a passport which has been approved on the other side, but a rocket can, with luck, burst into outer space on the strength of energy developed within the earth's atmosphere. And so it goes. Which of these metaphors is the more illuminating? Is deciding whether an envisaged being really exists more like applying for a passport or rocketing into space? Evidently we need a more literal characterization of the situation. Here is such a characterization.

A. Earlier we saw that an existential statement has the function of setting up a subject for predication. Now that we have recognized different modes of existence we can add a further stipulation: the kind of existence which is being stated will place limits on the sorts of predication that can be made with respect to that subject, that is, on the logical status of statements which can be made about it. A few examples should make this clear.

1. As I come into the house, I hear my wife who, unbeknownst to me, is reading a story to some children, say, "The cookies in the pantry are delicious." Being hungry, I go to the pantry, but

am disappointed to find the cookies there stale and tasteless, whereupon I upbraid my wife for deception.

2. In a discussion of Dostoevski's *The Brothers Karamazov* in which undue emphasis was being given to Dmitri and Alyosha, someone might say, "After all, old man Karamazov had three sons." An unlettered youth who had just come into the group might ask, "Are any of them still living?"

3. A physics student tells me that the electrons of which my desk is composed are moving around with great speed. When I ask him how powerful a microscope would be needed to see them, he replies that they cannot be seen through any existing microscope, nor would he expect to see them through any microscope, no matter how powerful, whereupon I accuse him of talking nonsense.

In these cases a subject-predicate statement was misunderstood because of a misapprehension as to the kind of existence being presupposed. Under this misapprehension the hearers took the statements to have a kind of logical status they lacked. In particular, the statements were misinterpreted as to their implications, theoretical or practical. The statements were mistakenly supposed to have the following implications:

1. A hungry man who wants good cookies would be well advised to go into the pantry.
2. Either the sons of Karamazov are still living, or they have died since the time under discussion.
3. If one could achieve sufficient power of magnification, he could see the ultimate particles of which this desk is composed.

A mistake was also made concerning the considerations and procedures relevant to supporting or attacking the statements:

1. Examination of the contents of the pantry.
2. Questioning of elderly citizens in the neighborhood or friends of the family. Consultation of official records.
3. Scanning the desk through the highest-power microscope available.

Generalizing from these cases, we can say that the kind of

considerations which are relevantly adduced in defending or attacking a subject-predicate statement, and the sorts of implications which can be drawn from it, are a function (in part) of the kind of existence presupposed. Presuppose that there were three flying saucers in my dream, and nothing tells for or against any statement about these three objects except my (sincere) report. But presuppose that there really were three flying saucers over the Grand Canyon yesterday, and now the testimony of others, consideration of laws of aerodynamics, and so forth, become relevant to the evaluation of statements about them. Presuppose that there was a King of the Round Table in legend, and all sorts of statements about him can be conclusively established by an examination of documents like *Morte d'Arthur*, without looking into their historical accuracy. But presuppose that there was a real historical king who had such a court, and much more is needed. Whether or not the statement "That ghost is in the house again" implies that abnormal phenomena are to be expected in the house in the immediate future depends on whether the assumption on which that statement rests is that a certain ghost exists in your imagination, or that a certain ghost really exists. "The men from Mars are approaching Plainfield, New Jersey" implies that Plainfield, New Jersey is in imminent danger only if real existence has been presupposed for men from Mars.

Note that in general it is the logical status of the predication which is delimited, not the possible predicates themselves. In general anything that can be said of a real man can be said of a legendary, fictional, or imaginary man. It is what gets said in applying any predicate which will differ in the way specified above.

Thus an existential statement determines a logical framework within which predications can be made of what has been said to exist. It can be construed as a license to make certain sorts of subject-predicate statements, and not others. In fact we might take the determination of such logical frameworks as a principle of differentation for modes of existence. If the same logical status is conferred, then there is only one mode of existence in question. It is on this kind of ground that we might refuse to distinguish

between existing in the understanding and existing in the mind, or between the mode of existence involved in existing in Australia and existing in South America, while insisting on a distinction between either of the first pair and either of the second.

One more step is needed before we can return, sufficiently girded, to the ontological argument. An existential statement has the same sorts of implications as the subject-predicate statements it licenses and to that extent falls within the logical framework it determines. This principle might be defended by saying that a licensing bureau cannot authorize anyone to do anything it does not have the authority to do, but this would be riding the metaphor too hard, or else regressing to the scholastic principle "The cause must contain at least as much perfection as the effect." A more sober defense would run like this. It seems that an existential statement not only permits a certain kind of subject-predicate statement but also guarantees that there will be true statements of that kind. To say that there really are sea serpents is to imply that there are true statements of the form "Sea serpents are . . ." which have the logical status of statements about physical objects. To say that there are *P*'s is to imply that something can be truly said about them. This entailment can be brought out by considering the logical oddity of the following dialogue.

A. There are a lot of bones six feet under my back yard.
B. Well, what about them?
A. Nothing. They are just there, that's all.
B. You mean you haven't looked at any of them yet?
A. No. It's not that I haven't found out anything about them yet. There is nothing to find out, except that they are there.

Why is this? Why do we refuse to admit the possibility that there are things about which nothing can be truly (synthetically) predicated? Perhaps it is because a referring expression is used to direct attention to something which goes beyond the characteristics connoted by the expression. If nothing could be said of the bones under my back yard other than that they are bones under my back yard, there would be no distinctive use for a referring expression here or for the subject-predicate form within which

it gets its use. There would be no point in distinguishing between "the bones under my back yard" and "bone under my back yard." The point in talking about *things which are* bones under my back yard is that each of those things possesses characteristics other than those connoted by the descriptive phrase used to refer to it. The very concept of a thing (and of its linguistic correlates, the referring expression and the subject-predicate sentence) requires such an overplus.

B. Now we can return to the ontological argument in its Anselmian form. Anselm escapes the standard criticism by presupposing existence in the understanding so as to get a subject of which he can show real existence to be necessarily predicated. But an equally unhappy fate awaits him. The statement which he is claiming to be necessarily true is a statement about a being in the understanding, and as such exhibits the logical features of statements based on a presupposition of mental existence. Among these features are: (1) It can be conclusively tested, if at all, by reflection. The person in whose understanding a certain being exists has only to reflect, to ask himself what he means by a certain term, in order to determine whether or not any statement about that being is true. A simple and instantaneous self-question is all that is needed to enable me to state with complete assurance that the girl of my dreams has eyes of blue. Nothing could possibly shake that assurance. (2) Existence in the understanding shares with other nonreal modes of existence the following features. For each existent in some nonreal mode, we can specify two sorts of real existents. First, there is some real existent of a given sort, which is always of the same sort for a given nonreal mode, the existence of which is entailed by the nonreal existence of the thing in question. Whenever something exists in my dreams, there must be a real conscious dream state; whenever something exists in legend or myth, there are real activities of repeating, hearing, thinking about the legends and myths in question; whenever something exists in my understanding, there are real thoughts, ideas, images, and so forth, in my mind which would ordinarily be said to be about this thing, perhaps real dispositions to behave in certain ways toward things

of this kind, and so forth. It is this entailment which lends plausibility to the project of reducing all other modes of existence to real existence. Let us call such a real existent the *real correlate* of a nonreal existent. Second, we can specify something which really exists and has all the characteristics (excluding existence, if that exclusion is necessary) of the nonreal existent. Let us call this the *real archetype* of the nonreal existent. Thus the real archetype of a mountain in my dream would be a real mountain of the same size, shape, and so forth; the real archetype of Ivanhoe would be a Saxon nobleman of the twelfth century who did (some of) the things with which this character in Scott's novel was credited.

Now it seems to be a defining feature of all nonreal modes of existence that any statement about something which exists in such a mode will have no implications with respect to real things, except for its real correlate and any implications that might have. In particular it has no implications concerning the real archetype. This latter is an essential feature of the concept of different modes of existence. If the existence of something in one mode should imply its existence in another mode, the distinction between these two modes would crumble. To say that (the legendary) King Arthur won twelve battles implies nothing about the political or military fortunes of the past, or about historical records of the present and future, except that certain unspecified individuals have said and heard such things in legend-reciting contexts. To say that the mountains in my dream had very sharp peaks has no geographical implications; it is of significance not to the map-maker but to the psychoanalyst. Likewise any statement which attaches a predicate to something which exists in my understanding can have no implications for the real world except for the fact that I have, or have had, certain thoughts.

This means that if "The being than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in reality" is to be interpreted as the attribution of a predicate to a being in the understanding, it can have no implications with respect to the real world other than the fact that Anselm, or whoever else forms this concept, had a certain idea in his mind. But it is plain that as this sentence would ordinarily be understood, it implies much more than this about

the real world. In accordance with the principle enunciated above, this existential statement implies that there are some true statements about a really existing perfect being, having the sorts of implications that such statements typically have; and in addition it specifically implies the truth of any statement of the form "The perfect being is *P*," where *P* is analytically contained in perfection, together with whatever implications such statements as these have. And it is equally plain that Anselm understands it, and purports to have established it, in this sense. The ensuing sections of the *Proslogium* make it plain that he supposed his thesis to entail the following propositions (by way of the fact that perfection analytically entails omnipotence and perfect goodness): (1) everything in the world is arranged for the best; (2) the righteous will ultimately be rewarded and the guilty will be punished, at least those who are not pardoned by divine mercy; (3) the world causally depends for its existence on a perfect spiritual being; (4) every man is under an obligation to worship and seek a real contact with this being. Obviously none of this follows from the fact that Anselm or anyone else has certain thoughts.

Thus Anselm, though more subtle than Descartes, is finally brought to the same pass. "The perfect being exists in reality" can only be claimed to be necessarily true, at least on the grounds adduced by Anselm, provided we construe "exists in reality" as a predicate of the perfect being, the existence of which in the understanding has been presupposed. But this gives us a statement the logical status of which sharply distinguishes it from an ordinary statement of real existence and prevents it from having the sort of religious significance for the sake of which the conclusion was sought. If, per contra, we make a statement of real existence in the ordinary sense, which has the sort of implications we want, this prevents it from being construed as the attribution of a property to a being which exists in the understanding, and neither Anselm nor anyone else has given any reasons for considering the statement to be necessary.

At this point we might get the old refrain, "But this case is different. It is generally true that statements about nonreal existents can have no implications for reality outside their real

correlates. But this principle gained its plausibility from a survey of cases which omitted the one in hand. Here is the one case to which they do not apply. In this one case a statement about a mental being has implications for the real world outside our ideas and thoughts, for this case is unique in that the predicate involved is real existence. And this claim cannot be overthrown by the use of principles built on other cases, from which this one differs in crucial respects."

But it is too late in the day for this maneuver. The claim to be examining this case in itself will not hold up. Such an examination, however narrowly concentrated, must make use of general terms like "predicate," "exists in reality," and the like, and its (apparent) force depends on (apparently) using these terms in their ordinary senses. If Anselm did not suppose "The perfect being exists in reality" to be a predication in the ordinary sense of "predication," his argument that this statement is necessary could never get off the ground. If he were not using "exists in the understanding" in its customary sense, his existential presupposition would have no force; if he were not using "exists in reality" in its ordinary sense, his conclusion would not have the religious relevance for the sake of which it was sought. It is essential for his argument that this case *not* be different in the sense given these terms. But my argument depended solely on an elucidation of the ordinary senses of these terms. It is impossible that there should be exceptions to the principles I have been invoking, so long as we are using "predicate," "really exists," and so forth, in the usual way. Thus Anselm is barred from claiming idiosyncrasy for his case in any way which would confer exemption from these principles.

C. It might look as if this revised critique of the ontological argument has been developed without relying on the denial that "exists" is a predicate; indeed, without having refurbished that denial after it had collapsed in the face of a plurality of modes of existence. But this would be a superficial view. The above considerations have only to be generalized to provide a revised proof that "exists" is not a predicate.

The standard argument was seen to be faulty in failing to rule

out the possibility that statements of real existence, for example, could be construed as attributions of real existence to a subject which had been assumed to exist in some other mode. But now a closer look at the distinctions between the various modes of existence has shown them to be unfitted for this role. We have seen that no statement which attributes something to a nonreal being can have the logical status (implications, and so forth) of a statement of real existence. Hence this attempt to interpret real existence as a predicate collapses. This argument can then be further generalized to show that no mode of existence can be construed as an attribute. For the mode of existence presupposed by the subject term (which has to be different from the mode of existence predicated, or the traditional argument comes back into force) will give the statement a logical status which will inevitably fail to coincide with the status it must have if it is to be a statement of existence of the sort embodied in the (supposed) predicate. Thus if we try to construe "King Arthur exists in legend" as the attribution of legendary existence to a subject presupposed to exist in the imagination, we run into the difficulty that no statement about what exists in the imagination can have the sort of implications about what goes on in legend-narrating activities that a statement of legendary existence must have. And if we try to construe "There were two of the Karamazov brothers in my dream" as attributing dream-existence to two men who are presupposed as having fictional existence, we run afoul of the fact that my statement has implications as to what was going on in my consciousness during the night which no statement about fictional characters can have.

I am not saying, of course, that we cannot make a transition from one mode of existence to another. We can consider a mythological figure, a character in fiction, a scene in a dream, or a theoretically envisaged entity like a cosmic designer or a solar vortex, and ask whether it also really exists. We very often do this, and sometimes the answer is in the affirmative. I can say that the legendary figure, King Arthur, was a really existing British monarch, that in California last summer I came upon the very mountains I have been dreaming of so persistently for years and so discovered that they really existed after all. But in

doing so am I not predicating real existence of that which I have already presupposed to exist in my dreams? It might look that way, but there are less obvious features of these statements which save us from the dire consequences of that interpretation. Note that they can all be restated as a simple conjunction of two independent statements each of which is on the same level, neither presupposing the other. "King Arthur exists in legend, and King Arthur really existed in the sixth century." "Mountains of such-and-such a description exist in my dreams, and mountains of that description really exist in California." And this sort of statement gives a more faithful reflection of our intent. What we want to say is that Arthur exists both in legend and in reality, that is, we want to treat both modes of existence on a par, as having the same connection to Arthur. But on a subject-predicate interpretation this would not be the case. Real existence would be predicated of the legendary figure, but legendary existence would not be predicated of the real figure. They can be treated alike only if what we say amounts to a simple conjunction of two logically independent existential statements, whereas an admitted subject-predicate statement like "King Arthur won twelve victories" cannot be so translated. Undoubtedly there are two statements involved here, namely, "There is in legend a figure called King Arthur," and "He won twelve victories," but they are not independent. The second cannot be stated without a backward reference to the first (for the antecedent of "he"). It is this asymmetry that is the mark of the subject-predicate form. A subject-predicate statement is one with respect to which two questions must be raised. One question concerns the existence of something, and the other, concerning the applicability of an attribute to that something, cannot be raised until the first question has been answered in the affirmative. By this criterion "The legendary figure, King Arthur, really existed" is not a subject-predicate statement. We need not treat it in any such two-layered fashion.

One source of the tendency to treat "King Arthur really existed in the sixth century" as a subject-predicate statement is the strong inclination to allow such a question as "Who is it that is being said to have really existed in the sixth century?" Discuss-

ing the matter in those terms will lead us straight to the subject-predicate framework; indeed that question springs from that framework. It is the part of wisdom to recognize that the above discussion, in showing the fundamental differences between that sentence and any sentence in the subject-predicate mold, has demonstrated that the question is badly put. And having recognized that, and having seen that we can say everything we want to say without it, we must avoid it like the plague.

Thus, even admitting various modes of existence, it is impossible to construe existential statements as predicative. And yet in this more adequate perspective, the denial cannot be so clear-cut. On the standard approach (recognizing only one mode of existence) "exists" could in no way function as a predicate. But if we recognize a plurality of modes, it must be admitted that there are (rather infrequent) statements which involve something like a predicate of existence. For example, a novelist can present a character as a real man, as a character in a story, or as contained in a dream. Thus in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan is a really existing man, but the Grand Inquisitor is only a figure in a dream of Ivan's. In *Tom Jones* Parson Thwackum is a real person, but Sir George Gresham only appears in a story narrated by the Man of the Hill. That is, a fictional character can, within the novel, have real, fictional, or dream existence. Again, I can dream about real people or fictional people. (By this I do not mean that the people about whom I dream can really be either real or fictional, but rather that they can be presented in the dream as either real or fictional.) Or I can dream of thinking about Eisenhower, in which case in my dream Eisenhower has existence in the understanding. In other words, among other ways of distinguishing between the characters in a novel or in a dream, we can consider the modes of existence attached to them. This gives us fictional or dream duplications of real existence, dream existence, fictional existence, and so forth. The various modes of existence, like the whole apparatus of qualities, substances, relations, and the like, are carried over bodily into fiction and dreams and exist there with all their interconnections intact. And we can put this, if we like, by saying that real existence,

fictional existence, and so forth, can be predicated of a fictional or of a dream character.

But of course the possibility of this sort of predication gives no support to the thesis that existence is an attribute. These very special sorts of statements are clearly distinguishable from ordinary statements of existence. No one would confuse our initial example about Alyosha and the Grand Inquisitor with an assertion that Alyosha really exists whereas the Grand Inquisitor does not. The heart of the denial that "exists" is a predicate is the claim that statements of existence are not predicative; this remains unshaken by the sort of predication we have just considered.

D. I have done nothing to show that "A perfect being exists" is not, or cannot be shown to be, a necessary statement; still less have I shown that there are, or can be, no necessary existential statements. Such claims are often made with great confidence, but I have never seen any conclusive arguments in their support, nor have I been able to find any. Certainly the demonstration that "exists" is not a predicate does nothing to show that no existential statements are necessary. For there are many necessary statements which turn on the logical properties of terms other than predicates, for example, the statement that if I am writing with either pen or pencil, then it is not the case that I am writing with neither pen nor pencil. The most that can be done, it seems to me, is to examine and evaluate each claim that is made for the necessity of an existential statement. This essay is designed to make a contribution to that enterprise. In it I have attempted to reveal more clearly the deficiencies in the ontological argument, and in the course of so doing to show more conclusively that "exists" is not a predicate.

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