

# How Does Kant Employ The Distinction Between Analytic and Synthetic Propositions in his criticisms of the Ontological Argument ?

## Introduction

The ontological argument is considered unique amongst arguments for God's existence because it is the only argument that can be classified as an *a priori* argument. By this we mean the sequence of logic we follow to draw the conclusion is not dependent on experience and must necessarily be so (Palmer, p2).

However, we also need to refine the context of the argument as we first need definitions so that we can agree about that which we are arguing. Once the definition is in place, it provides its own verification and may be regarded as true. It does not need recourse to experiential or empirical evidence (Ibid, p3). It is worthwhile to note that the ontological argument is not a mode of reasoning applied to God alone but is employed in many other disciplines, especially mathematics (Gale, p201).

Applying the ontological argument to God is based purely on the analysis of the *concept* of God. Various versions of the ontological argument have been made (Ibid p202) but will all have the basis that once we have agreed upon a definition of God, it follows that to deny the existence of God would be a logical contradiction.

The weakness of all arguments comes from the very nature of the *premises* or *predicates* that the opponent must concede prior to the argument. If it can be rationally shown that the original premises are suspect then the argument can not, *a priori*, prove the existence of God [Ibid p216]. Thus, we turn to Kant.

## **Kant's Objections**

Kant is considered to have 'demolished' the ontological argument (Russel, p411).

To understand Kant's objections we need to summarise the core ideas that he developed in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. The purpose of the work is stated by Russel (Ibid p679) to prove that knowledge is both *a priori* being that which as well as what is logical includes that which can not be deduced from logic. In doing so, he formulates the distinction between 'analytic' and 'synthetic' propositions.

Simply stated, an *analytic* proposition is one in which the *predicate* is part of the subject, e.g. a tall man is a man or an equilateral triangle is a triangle. In other words, it is necessarily so and to deny it is so would be a self contradictory proposition (ibid p679).

Conversely, a *synthetic proposition* is one which is not analytic. These are propositions that we know only through experience or 'sense knowledge'. However, Kant is held not to admit that all synthetic propositions are known *only* by experience. However, the core concept of interest here is that we can not *know* the truth of the propositions by explorations of the concepts alone.

Kant's understanding of the world as presented in the *Critique of Pure Reason* can be summarised thus:

1. The outer world causes only the matter of sensation;
2. Our own mental apparatus orders this matter in space and time;
3. We construct concepts by which we understand experience.

However, the key idea that Kant argues for in *Critique* is in the fourth step:

4. The things that cause the experience are unknowable (Ibid p680).

In discussing Kant's moral case for the existence of God, *Richards* (2006) describes this in the following way:

"What we would need to do would be to experience the true (pure) nature of God. However, that we all perceive the world in different ways, suggests to Kant that such 'pure' (or objective) knowledge is simply not available to us. Therefore, a further problem he deduced from each of these arguments [the ontological] is that in each of them, reason is going beyond what it might reasonably hope to know (or what we are actually be able to experience)."

Kant summarises the ontological argument as defining God as the *most real Being*, i.e. the subject of all predicates that belong to being absolutely. As Existence is a predicate, the subject God must have that predicate. However, he makes the case that existence is *not* a predicate as you can imagine the concept of "money" without that money actually existing. We can add as many predicates as we wish to the concept but that in no means there is evidence for the existence. What they enable is that *if* someone was searching for money, they would more likely be able to recognise money if they found it (Palmer, p12).

He proposes that 'God, freedom and immortality' are *ideas of reason* but can not in themselves prove their reality. God can only be shown to exist by considering the requirements of justice and the moral law (Russel, p682).

Thus, he refutes the ontological argument's assertion that the intellectual acceptance of a definition necessarily means that the object exists. There is no logical contradiction when the predicate is *not* part of the subject. *A priori* truths necessarily imply the predicate is part of the subject. Existence is not part of the concept but something which must be independently validated (Palmer, p13).

In summary, if we define X it does not mean that X exists even if we define X as to be of the most perfect existence.

This can then be developed to show that existence is not necessarily a requirement of perfection which was the basis of Anselm's and later Descartes' ontological argument. Kant conceded to Descartes that certain concepts require certain essential and necessary features (Palmer, p16) but when it comes to existential statements they are always synthetic and possibly false, it can never be certain because the possibility of them being incorrect is a necessary logical step.

Thus, to assert that existence is necessary and so to exclude non-existence implies a self-contradiction about the nature of existence. The elegant case is to discuss the existence of bachelors but because it is understood what they are, it can be said they 'exist' but we have to admit the possibility of their non-existence in reality. The argument for bachelors establishes the concept of their existence but it is no closer to

proving their existence even though the concept of the possibility of their existence is established. In other words, it is not logically inconsistent if both the predicates and the subject are both rejected.

### **Conclusion**

Kant concludes that the ontological argument is only proving what it is already assuming (Palmer p19). The implication of this statement is that we can *never* offer any proof about the existence of anything non-empirically. A synthetic statement may be apparently true but it must allow the possibility that it is incorrect.

Kant adopted the position that *reason alone* is insufficient grounds to establish a proof for the existence of God and went onto develop the moral case for the existence of God.

### **References**

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