

Conceptual Closure in Anselm's Proof

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Gyula Klima maintains that Anselm's ontological argument is best understood in terms of a theory of reference that was made fully explicit only by later medievals. I accept the interpretative claim but offer here two objections to the argument so interpreted. The first points up a certain ambiguity in Klima's formulation of the argument, the correction of which requires a substantive revision of the argument's conclusion. The second exploits the notion of semantic closure introduced by Tarski. Klima offers the atheist an 'out' by drawing a distinction between *constitutive* and *parasitic* reference. I argue that using Klima's preferred description ('the thought object than which no thought object can be thought to be greater') to refer constitutively to God results in *conceptual closure*, a condition analogous to semantic closure that renders the instant conceptual scheme inconsistent and subject to paradox. Although the proof ultimately fails, Klima's development of the notions of constitutive and parasitic reference has important and far-reaching implications.

1. Introduction

Gyula Klima has recently offered a novel and sophisticated interpretation of Anselm's ontological argument, which he takes to be valid proof of God's existence (*Klima 2000*). The interpretation exploits a distinctively medieval conception of reference that stands at odds with the twentieth-century notion of reference endorsed by Russell, Quine, and their heirs. The elements of this theory of reference (which I shall sketch below) are neither articulated nor endorsed explicitly by Anselm himself; nonetheless, Klima thinks it is quite helpful to use the theory in analysing the argument, and that Anselm's treatment of the various objections to his proof implicitly invokes a nascent version of it. Once one views Anselm's argument in the light of such a theory of reference, Klima claims, its soundness is evident.

I have no qualms with Klima's interpretative claim: for all I know, he has got Anselm's argument just right. I do, however, dispute his contention that the argument so interpreted succeeds in establishing the existence of God. I offer here two related objections. The first objection points up a certain ambiguity in Klima's formulation of the argument that renders one of the premises of the argument dubiously true. This objection is, I think, sufficient to dispatch the argument as it is offered by Anselm and Klima.¹ However, repairing the defective premise results in an argument whose conclusion is not without interest. My second (and principal) objection to Klima's version of Anselm takes this conclusion as its starting point and proceeds by considering the escape route that Klima offers the atheist. Drawing on Tarski's (1944) notion of semantic closure, I argue that in order to obtain Klima's desired conclusion, the requisite interpretation of the predicates figuring in the argument produces a paradox not unlike familiar semantic and set-theoretic paradoxes. Resolving the paradox gen-

1 In the interest of readability, I shall use 'Klima's argument' and 'Anselm's argument' more or less interchangeably, as context recommends. When I use the former, it should be understood that I mean to refer to Anselm's argument as interpreted by Klima, since I do not mean to ascribe authorship of the argument to Klima.

erated by Klima's interpretation requires rejecting the terms under which the original argument is offered, rendering it unviable. Despite this, though, Klima's work contains a very interesting and important insight that seems to me full of promise. I conclude the paper by noting briefly a couple of the more general points that fall out of my discussion.

2. Intentional reference and the proof

The novelty of Klima's argument lies primarily in its employment of two doctrines belonging to medieval theories of reference: ampliation, and *entia rationis*. I can do little more here than draw the outlines of these doctrines, but outlines will be sufficient for my purposes.

For the medievals, the reference of a term is inextricably context-bound, such that one and the same term can refer to entirely different particulars or classes (or fail to refer altogether) in different propositional contexts. In the simplest case, a common term $\ulcorner K \urcorner$ refers to just those *Ks* that actually presently exist. For example, in context of the sentence:

Raskolnikov is a cat

the extension of the term 'cat' includes only living felines. Since (I am glad to say) my eleven-year-old tabby Raskolnikov is still with us, the sentence is true.

However, if we replace Raskolnikov's name with 'Beerbohm', the sentence becomes false. For even though Beerbohm was famous for keeping London's Globe theatre relatively mouse-free, there is now no such actual cat. The truth regarding Beerbohm's cathood, according to medieval semantics, is this:

Beerbohm was a cat

In this example, the past-tense aspect of the verb ampliates 'cat' such that its extension includes not only actual, presently existing cats, but also past cats. The following, though, is not true:

Beerbohm's offspring were cats

for there were no actual cats such that they were the offspring of that famous mouser.² If we wish to speak truly, we must say this:

Beerbohm's offspring would have been cats

In this case, the subjunctive mood further ampliates 'cats' to include in its extension not only actual cats (both past and present), but also merely possible cats. And obviously, it is logically possible that Beerbohm should have sired a litter of kittens.

So temporal and modal contexts can amplify a term, extending its reference beyond the present and the actual. But what are we to make of Swift's (*1726*) Brobdingnagian cat, of which he writes that it is 'three times larger than an Ox'? Well, Gulliver is a fictional character, and his travels are fictional, too. So the exceedingly large cat he

² I honestly do not know whether Beerbohm sired any kittens. I assume not simply for the sake of illustration.

encounters on the island of Brobdingnag is a fictional cat. Given the appropriate ampliative device, the extension of 'cat' can be made to include even fictional felines:

In *Gulliver's Travels*, there is a cat living on Brobdingnag

Sometimes, however, it is not so obvious that we are dealing with figments of our imagination. Consider Allen, whose vegetable garden was recently ransacked by a mischievous raccoon. Allen is unaware of the fact that raccoons reside in his neighbourhood, and he pins the blame on his neighbour's pet:

Allen thinks that his neighbour's cat ruined his vegetable garden

But suppose that his neighbour has no cat—what Allen took to be a cat slinking around next door is really his neighbour's pet ferret. What are we to say about Allen's hypothesis? Is it really about his neighbour's ferret? Is it no hypothesis at all, due to a failure of reference?

The medievals preferred to take such statements at face-value. To put the point quite generally, while it is not the case that there are non-existent things lurking about waiting to be thought of (no ampliation of 'things' here), one can, *pace* Parmenides,³ think of things that do not actually exist. And if one can think of such things, then one should not be barred from referring to them. Thus, it is perfectly acceptable for us, knowing the truth about Allen's catless neighbour, to say that Allen thinks that his neighbour's cat ruined his vegetable garden. When we do so, our use of 'his neighbour's cat' successfully refers (by virtue of the particular ampliative context) to a certain item figuring in Allen's imagination, about which we can also think.

In ampliative contexts resulting from intentional verbs like 'think', according to the semantic theories current in late medieval times, terms refer to *entia rationis*, or objects of thought, which may or may not be *bona fide* objects. Specifically, the referent of a linguistic expression in such contexts is determined by the intention of its user on the particular occasion of use. This conception of reference differs from the Russellian notion at least to the extent that, on the intentional conception, one can refer successfully to mere objects of thought, ones that do not exist in extramental reality and consequently are not genuine objects, properly speaking. On the Russellian conception, however, reference is inextricably linked with existence, such that an individual who attempts to refer by using a singular term that fails to connect up with anything in the world simply fails to refer (*Russell 1905*). For instance, when a child expresses her wish that Santa Claus will deliver a pony on Christmas morning, her use of the proper name 'Santa Claus' constitutes a failure of reference. For on Russell's view, in so using the name, the child implicitly asserts the existence of exactly one man fitting a certain familiar description, and the sad truth is that there is no such man.

But things are different in the case of the intentional conception of reference. Because the child's use of the name occurs within an ampliative context ('wish' being an intentional verb), the object of her intention fully determines the referent of the singular term on that occasion of use. When our hopeful pony recipient, then, expresses her wish concerning Santa's gift, the name in fact refers to Santa Claus—a certain item figuring in her consciousness for which (unbeknownst to her) there is no extramental

3 '... For the same is for thinking and for being.' DK 28B3.

correlate. She refers to something, but this something is not a genuine object as conceived by her; it is merely an object of thought.

Klima's motives for attributing this intentional conception of reference to Anselm are both exegetical and apologetic. For Klima maintains (plausibly, I think) that although the details of the theory were not fully articulated until the thirteenth century, Anselm's reply to Gaunilo demonstrate that he was in fact committed to something very much like this view and would have found the Russellian conception of reference totally alien (*Klima 2000*). But the exegetical point is not without philosophical significance: on the Russellian conception of reference, Anselm's proof is question-begging insofar as its unstated but necessary assumption that 'God' is significant entails the existence of the name's referent. On the intentional conception of reference, there is no such fault, since Anselm's description of God as 'that than which nothing greater can be thought' amplifies the demonstrative pronoun to include in its candidate extensions thought objects, any of which might fail to be an object *simpliciter*. Klima's purpose is in part to obviate once and for all this rather gross sort of objection by revealing its anachronistic underpinnings.

As described, the intentional conception of reference suggests a quantificational scheme in which variables range over thought objects, any one of which may or may not (*contra Quine 1980*) be a genuine object. Employing otherwise conventional notation, where '*I**x*' is interpreted as '*x* is only in the intellect', '*R**x*' as '*x* can be thought to exist in reality', '*M**xy*' as '*x* can be thought to be greater than *y*', and where '*g*' names God, Klima provides the following formulation and assessment of Anselm's proof:

- | | | |
|-----|--|-----------------------|
| (1) | $g =_{df} \iota x. \sim (\exists y)(Myx)$ | |
| (2) | Ig | |
| (3) | $(\forall x)(\forall y)((Ix \ \& \ Ry) \rightarrow Myx)$ | |
| (4) | Rg | |
| (a) | Mgg | [2, 3, 4, UI, &I, MP] |
| (b) | $(\exists y)(Myg)$ | [a, EG] |
| (5) | $(\exists y)(My(\iota x. \sim (\exists y)(Myx)))$ | [1, b, SI] |

... Abbreviating ' $(\exists y)(My(\))$ ' as ' $P(\)$ ', (5) will look like ' $P(\iota x. \sim Px)$ ', i.e., ' $(\exists x)(\sim Px \ \& \ (\forall y)(\sim Py \rightarrow x = y) \ \& \ Px)$ ', which implies ' $(\exists x)(\sim Px \ \& \ Px)$ ', an explicit contraction. But then, since (1), (3) and (4) have to be accepted as true, (2) has to be rejected as false. So it is not true that God exists only in the intellect. But since to exist only in the intellect means to exist in the intellect but not in reality, not to exist only in the intellect means either not to exist in the intellect, or to exist in the intellect and also in reality. Therefore, since God, being thought of, does exist in the intellect, he has to exist also in reality.⁴

The formally regimented argument is pretty clearly valid, and none of the premises of which it is alleged to be a formalization is obviously objectionable. The first premise simply articulates Anselm's conception of God as the thought object than which no

4 *Klima 2000* (pp. 73–74). I've removed parentheses that surround each predicate's argument(s) in Klima's formulation, as they seem to me both distracting and unnecessary.

thought object can be thought greater.⁵ The second premise is just the *reductio* assumption that God is a mere thought object. As for the third premise—the claim that thought objects that can be thought to exist in reality can be thought to be greater than mere thought objects—one might allege (as Klima himself does) that it is analytic by virtue of the meaning of ‘greater than’. Finally, one might convince himself of the truth of the fourth premise—the claim that God can be thought to exist in reality—by introspection. So Klima’s claim that these premises ‘have to be accepted as true’ is initially plausible.

But despite the apparent plausibility that each of the premises enjoys, I shall argue that the regimented argument is not an adequate formation of the original argument insofar as it obscures an important ambiguity in the original.

3. Ambiguity in the argument

My first line of objection aims to highlight a certain incongruity among the trio of predicates that figure in Klima’s argument. I begin by noting that the relation ‘... can be thought greater than ...’ is at least triply ambiguous. On the face of it, the relation is analysable into two distinct logical components: what I shall call a *modal-pistic operator* (‘it can be thought that ...’), and the *greater than* relation. I take the former operator to function as a two-place relation obtaining between persons and propositions. It is true of just those pairs of persons and propositions such that the proposition is regarded by the person as being metaphysically possible.⁶ It’s not clear whether the latter operator takes as its arguments ordinal, or cardinal values. I shall suppose for simplicity’s sake that it takes cardinal values, though I don’t think that anything important hangs on this.

The second point to notice is that relation in question is obviously not irreflexive. Were it so, Klima’s having derived the statement on line (4a) would have been sufficient to reject the assumption on line (2) that made the derivation possible. But he clearly does not think it sufficient, since the argument famously proceeds by employing the definition of God on line (1) in order to derive an explicit contradiction. So let ‘*b*’ denote some thought object such that ‘*Mbb*’ is true, and let ‘*Gb*’ denote *b*’s cardinality of greatness, actual or merely possible, with respect to whatever factor is re-

5 Anselm responds to Gaunilo’s perfect island objection by claiming that one may not append kind terms to the description ‘greater than which none can be conceived’, and I might be thought to be in violation of that restriction. However, ‘thought object’ is not a kind term: it no more picks out a subset of all objects any more than ‘fake diamonds’ (Klima’s example) picks out a subset of all diamonds. The point (indeed, Anselm’s point, if Klima has got him right) is that the range of the variables figuring in the argument is to be construed as including all conceivable, thanks to the ampliative context provided by the predicates employed therein.

6 This gloss might seem to get it wrong insofar as the English predicate affixes the modal element to thinking rather than to being true, which suggests that we understand it to mean that it is metaphysically possible that the proposition in question actually be thought true by the relevant agent, rather than the proposition in question is actually thought metaphysically possible. A bit of reflection should convince one, however, that what is meant is the latter. Further, I invoke metaphysical rather than epistemic possibility here because, as will become clear momentarily, the notion of epistemic possibility is too narrow for the purpose at hand. I index the operator to individual rational agents in order to avoid the problems that would be involved in characterizing the operator in terms of rational agents generally, or (perhaps worse yet) in terms of some ideal rational agent. Thus, I understand Klima’s predicate ‘*Mxy*’ to implicitly include a third argument position whose substituends are singular terms, each of whose referent is some rational agent: ‘*x* can be thought to be greater than *y* by *z*’. The examples I use in the sequel illustrate this treatment. The idea in Anselm’s argument, then, is for the reader to consider his own case by using his name or ‘I’ appropriately.

garded as relevant by all interested parties.⁷ Now it can't possibly be the case that Klima is willing to maintain that '*Mbb*' means:

(α) It can be thought that ($Gb > Gb$)

for that is clearly false: no rational agent who possesses the requisite concepts can regard any instance of ' $n > n$ ' as expressing a metaphysical possibility. Or, at any rate, someone who appeared to be capable of holding such a view would not be a candidate beneficiary of Anselm's argument, for only those who recognize the patent impossibility of ' $n > n$ ' would seem to possess the intellectual acumen required to recognize the alleged consequences of Anselm's premises as such.

In properly interpreting the predicate, then, the scope of the modal-pistic operator must be limited to one side or the other of the principal function. I think that there are just two plausible alternatives here. The first can be expressed as a conjunction that employs a single modal-pistic operator modifying the expression that recurs on the left-hand side of the *greater than* function in the right-hand conjunct:

(β) It can be thought that (G_1b), and $G_1b > G_2b$

where ' G_2b ' denotes b 's actual cardinality of greatness. Here, an agent who entertains the thought in question thinks it metaphysically possible that b has a certain degree of greatness that happens to be greater than the degree of greatness that b in fact enjoys. It is not required, of course, that the agent have cognitive access to b 's actual cardinality of greatness: it might simply be the case that he has a sincere, though inaccurate, estimation of b 's greatness. For example, Jones can think that Smith is physically larger than himself, on this reading, if Jones believes (and thus regards it as being metaphysically possible, as it surely is) that Smith should be 5' 10" and 190 pounds, when he is in fact only 5' 9" and 180 pounds.

Although this reading of the predicate does not fall prey to the objection of absurdity to which (α) is subject, it is nonetheless clear that it will not serve Klima's purposes. For on (β), the description of God employed in the argument is the following: the thought object whose actual cardinality of greatness is no less than the cardinality of greatness one might think it metaphysically possible for any other thought object to possess. This is quite obviously question-begging—given the connection between greatness and existence advanced in the third premise of the argument, Klima would on this interpretation just be *stipulating* God's existence. Consequently, (β) must also be rejected.

The final interpretation of the predicate employs a pair of modal-pistic operators, each modifying an expression that recurs as one of the argument of the *greater than* function in the right-hand conjunct:

(γ) It can be thought that (G_1b), and it can be thought that (G_2b), and $G_1b > G_2b$

⁷ Anselm, of course, regards various moral, epistemic, and ontic perfections to be the relevant feature, and I invite the reader to understand this in whatever way seems appropriate, since it is strictly irrelevant to my project here. I shall have occasion, however, to illustrate different claims involving the predicate ' Gx ' with other sorts of cardinalities. In doing so, I am not suggesting that Anselm would have regarded these as functioning like degrees of perfection in the relevant respects.

I take this to be the correct analysis of the predicate ' Mxy '. It accounts for the non-irreflexivity of the relation, and as will become clear momentarily, it brings to the surface the incongruity I mentioned earlier. But on this analysis, in order that the predicate '... can be thought greater than ...' be true of some subject S with respect to some pair of thought objects x and y , it must be the case that S thinks it possible that x has a certain cardinality of greatness (with respect to the relevant criterion) G_1 , and S thinks it possible that y has a certain cardinality of greatness G_2 , and $G_1 > G_2$. For example, I can, on this interpretation, think that the Great Wall of China (whose precise length I do not know) is greater than itself. For it seems evidently possible to me that the Great Wall of China should be approximately 5000 kilometers in length, and it also seems possible that it should be closer to 4950 kilometers in length. To be sure, this interpretation of the problematic predicate has very many plausible instances, and it does not render Anselm's description of God question-begging.

But now reconsider the third premise in the light of our proper understanding of the relation that figures in it:

$$(\forall x)(\forall y)((Ix \ \& \ Ry) \rightarrow Myx)$$

It is here alleged that x 's simply *being* a mere thought object (that's ' Ix ') along with y 's being such that it *can be thought* to exist in reality, constitutes a sufficient condition for its being the case that x *can be thought* greater than y . But it should now be evident that this claim is plausible only if one adopts reading (β), which employs the actual cardinality of greatness for one of the relata. However, it has been shown that this is an untenable interpretation of the predicate, one that renders the description of God question-begging. To put the point more generally, although Klima's interpretation of ' Rx ' has the right kind of character to support half of the relation denoted by ' Mxy '—namely, a modal-pistic component—' Ix ' utterly lacks this character. So on Klima's interpretation of the predicates, the claim of sufficiency in the third premise is specious.

This can be seen even more clearly if we reinterpret the predicates and consider the plausibility of a claim that is logically equivalent to the third premise of Klima's argument. One can very easily confirm that the premise is equivalent to the following:

$$(\forall x)(\forall y)((Ry \ \& \ \sim Myx) \rightarrow \sim Ix)$$

Let ' Rx ' be interpreted as ' x can be thought to be a perfect truth-teller', let ' Ix ' be ' x has lied at least once', let ' Mxy ' be ' x can be thought to be more honest than y ', and let the variables range over persons. This reinterpretation of the predicates parallels Klima's interpretation of them in terms of their respective possession or lack of a modal-pistic operator. Now, one instance of this formula alleges that my ability to think that Jones is a perfect truth teller along with my inability to think that Jones is more honest than Smith entails that Smith has *in fact* never lied! Surely this is incredible. What is entailed, is that I cannot *think* that Smith has ever lied; otherwise, I *would* be able to think Jones more honest than Smith.

The incongruity among the three predicates in Klima's rendition of the argument is easy to miss on account of the fact that the second premise (' Ig ') is asserted as a *reductio* assumption. The required modal-pistic component sneaks into the argument by way of the context in which the claim is made: 'Suppose that God exists only in the imagination'. The ear is anaesthetized just enough to let the third premise go by unchallenged.

The upshot of all of this is the following: in order simultaneously to render the sufficiency claim in the third premise plausible and to accommodate (γ), the predicate ‘ Ix ’ must also be interpreted as including a modal-pistic component: ‘ x can be thought to exist only in the intellect’. One obvious consequence of this reinterpretation is the fact that the conclusion of the argument is not that God exists in reality, but rather that one cannot think God to exist only in the intellect.

This is surely a significantly different conclusion than that of the original argument. Is it enough for Anselm’s (or Klima’s) purposes? As it stands, I think not. For our inability to think that God exists only in the intellect does not strictly entail that He does not so exist. At best, the conclusion implies that pronouncements of atheism are in some sense incoherent. But in what sense?

4. A problem of common reference

In order to answer the question before us, and as a way of framing my principal objection to Klima’s argument, I shall have to consider the escape route that Klima offers to the atheist (2000, 77–79). He says that the consistent atheist can verbally accept Anselm’s description of God without accepting all of the logical consequences of that description so long as he uses Anselm’s description to refer *parasitically* rather than *constitutively*. To use a referring expression (whether a definite description or a proper name whose meaning is fixed, à la Russell, by some definite description) to refer constitutively is to intend to refer to something one has in mind while conceiving of the intended referent under the description in question. To use a referring expression to refer parasitically is to intend to refer to something one has in mind without conceiving of that thing under the description in question—typically, because one believes for one reason or another that the description does not genuinely apply.

For example, Smith remarks to Jones about Andrew Lloyd Webber’s treatment of a particular leitmotif in *Phantom of the Opera*, referring to him as ‘the most significant British composer in history’. Jones, no fan of contemporary musicals, might co-opt Smith’s description and reply by saying ‘The most significant British composer in history is a hack’. In making this retort, Jones does not contradict himself, nor even impugn any other British composer by implication. Jones employs Smith’s preferred description to refer to Smith’s intended referent, even though Jones does not believe that the description is actually true of the intended referent. Smith uses the description to refer constitutively to Webber: the description constitutes part of Smith’s conception of Webber, at least on this occasion. Jones uses the description to refer parasitically: he borrows part of the conceptual content of Smith’s conception of Webber in order to refer to the man, but he does so without adopting that conceptual content as part of his own conception of Webber.

Such is the phenomenon of parasitic reference with respect to *bona fide* objects. It can also function, however, in connection with mere thought objects. For instance, if a child were to ask her parents how long they think it takes Santa Claus to circumnavigate the globe from his shop at the South Pole, they would not be acting irresponsibly (or not obviously so) were they to correct her by pointing out that, as they understand it, Santa’s shop is located at the North Pole. When the child uses ‘Santa’, she conceives of her intended referent as a jolly old elf who delivers toys to children at Christmas by means of a flying-reindeer-drawn sleigh, etc. But when her parents use ‘Santa’, they conceive of their intended referent as a certain fictitious character whose existence is falsely (though benignly) affirmed by parents and others. They refer to that

which their daughter has in mind by borrowing part of her conception of Santa, but they do so without adopting it as part of their own conception. They do not believe that Santa lives at the North Pole, but they encourage their daughter to do so in order that the thought object to which she refers by her use of 'Santa' will conform with the popular conception of him. So the parents are free to assert that Santa's shop is located at the North Pole and to deny that it is located at the South Pole without thereby committing themselves to the existence of a jolly old elf who weighs more than ninety pounds, lives north of Minnesota, and so on, because they use 'Santa' to refer parasitically rather than constitutively.

In similar fashion, the atheist can refer parasitically to God under the theist's preferred description (viz. as the thought object than which no thought object can be thought greater) without thinking that the description actually applies to the intended referent, and he is therefore not obliged to accept any of the logical consequences of that description. In Klima's words:

[T]he atheist, when speaking about God, is constantly making parasitic reference to the theists [sic] object of thought, *using* the theist's beliefs to refer to this thought object, but *without ever sharing* them. Accordingly, he will be willing to admit that whoever thinks of something as that than which nothing greater can be thought of also has to think that this thing exists in reality, and that it cannot even be thought not to exist in reality. Being a consistent atheist, however, he himself will think of nothing as that than which nothing greater can be thought of (whence that than which nothing greater can be thought as such will not be in his mind). But he still will be able to think of what theists think of as that than which nothing greater can be thought. (2000, 79)

There is a fairly obvious sense, then, in which the theist and atheist are simply talking past one another when discussing God. Ostensibly, they are talking on just one subject, but because they have essentially different concepts, there is no genuine conversational exchange. So too in the case with the parents and their inquisitive daughter at Christmas. And it is precisely the fact that the parents know that this is the case which makes their participation in the tradition what it is: a mostly harmless act of deception by means of covert play-acting. There is no play-acting in the case of the theist and atheist, however—just fundamentally different worldviews and a consequent failure of dialectical engagement.

And so we are now situated to appreciate the dialectical weight of the proper conclusion of Klima's argument, as it was specified in Section 3. The consistent atheist should be quite comfortable admitting that one cannot think of God as a mere thought object (i.e. as existing only in the intellect) when one conceives of God under Anselm's description. In fact, we ought to regard Klima's argument (properly understood) as a way of making this point explicit insofar as it derives in a formal way from the Anselmian concept of God the impossibility of thinking that He does not exist in reality. So when the atheist denies that God exists, he is not saying of the thing than which nothing can be thought greater, that it (conceived as such) does not exist; rather, he is saying of the thing that the theist (mistakenly, by his lights) thinks of as that than which nothing greater can be thought, that it does not exist. He does not himself think of God as the thing than which nothing greater can be thought. After all, he is an atheist, and to think of anything as that than which nothing greater can be thought requires thinking of it as an existing thing.

Though the idea behind the escape route Klima offers is clear enough, I want now to attempt to show that it actually lights the way for a more potent objection to the original argument.

5. Constitutive reference and conceptual closure

Whereas my initial objection to Klima's argument functions by clarifying the predicates at work in the argument, the following line of objection calls into question the very legitimacy of employing these predicates as Klima does.

Klima maintains that the consistent atheist remains consistent only by using Anselm's 'God' to refer parasitically, and he clearly assumes that the theist's constitutive use of 'God' is equally safe. However, I shall argue that, given the original interpretation of the predicates in Klima's argument, using Anselm's 'God' to refer constitutively unavoidably results in inconsistency. This is a rather bold claim, so I shall try to temper it with a little modesty.

Let *Modest* be the thought object such that it is a non-mere thought object (Klima's ' $\sim Ix$ ') just in case it cannot be thought to exist in reality (Klima's ' $\sim Rx$ '). That is:

$$m =_{df} \iota x. (\sim Ix \leftrightarrow \sim Rx)$$

Modest is a very curious fellow: an omniscient, but terribly shy genie. Indeed, Modest is so shy that if someone other than himself so much as conceives his existence as being metaphysically possible, he 'extinguishes' himself from actuality. (Being omniscient, Modest has no trouble determining when he is conceived of as such.) Now Modest is certainly peculiar, but unlike the round square, he does not appear to be an impossible object. And in any event, Modest seems like a perfectly acceptable thought object.

But does Modest actually exist? This is an interesting question.

- (1) Suppose that Modest actually exists—i.e. that he is a non-mere thought object.
- (2) By our description of him, then, Modest cannot be thought to exist in reality.
- (3) But that contradicts our supposition that he does in fact exist.
- (4) So Modest cannot even be thought (employing constitutive reference) to exist in reality without contradiction.
- (5) But then by our description of him, Modest is a non-mere thought object; that is, Modest actually exists.
- (6) Thus, our original supposition that Modest actually exists is both inescapable and contradictory—a paradox.

This paradox resembles some familiar theoretic set-paradoxes (e.g. Russell's Set) and semantic paradoxes (e.g. the Liar), and I want to suggest that its resolution turns what is offered as a means of retreat for the atheist into a potent challenge to the Anselmian theist.

Let us begin by recalling briefly Russell's paradox and its resolution. Cantor's original principle of comprehension holds that for any predicate φ , there exists a set of all and only those objects satisfying the open sentence φx . But as Russell pointed out, the predicate '... is a non-self-membered set' yields paradoxical results. For if there were a set of all and only non-self-membered sets, then such a set would be a member of itself just in case it were not a member of itself—a paradox. Hence, there must be no such

set, and whatever assumption that is responsible for its postulation must either be jettisoned entirely or somehow modified to avoid the paradox. In the spirit of conservation, practically every philosopher weighing in on the subject prefers the latter option, maintaining some way or other to prise apart sets and the predicates by which their members are collected. Russell's simple theory of types serves this aim by stratifying logical orders of objects such that a set, each of whose members is of order K , is itself of order $K+1$ (Russell 1903). Thus, Cantor's principle of comprehension is supplanted with one according to which, for any predicate φ of order K , there exists a set of order $K+1$ whose members are exactly those objects of order K satisfying the open sentence φx . Within such a hierarchy of logical types, every set is a non-self-membered set, because every set is of an order greater than that of each of its members. And precisely because no set is a member of itself, there can be no set of all sets. Thus, there is no set whose members are all and only non-self-membered sets.

A similar kind of remedy for various semantic paradoxes has been offered up by Tarski. On the commonplace assumption that a sentence is true just in case what it asserts is the case, sentences that either directly or indirectly assert their own falsity (such as the Liar: 'This sentence is false') give rise to paradox insofar as they would seem to be true if and only if they are false. Antinomies like the Liar are expressible only in languages that are in Tarski's terms *semantically closed*. Tarski's characterization of semantic closure is that of a conflation of object- and meta-languages, where the object-language contains terms (such as 'true') that include in their extension expressions in the object-language. (Tarski 1944, 348–349, for a full account of semantic closure). His solution is to restrict (and to make more precise) the notion of truth in such a way that it is relativised to a language, and then to insist that no language be capable of expressing any claims about itself. Thus, 'This sentence [of \mathcal{L}] is true-in- \mathcal{L} ' is inexpressible in a well-behaved language. Like Russell, then, Tarski makes a levels distinction in order to preclude the statement of the paradox.

To indicate what I take to be the correct resolution of the Modest paradox, I would like to draw an informal comparison between Tarski's notion of semantic closure and the condition—which I shall call 'conceptual closure'—created by Klima's constitutive use of the predicates appearing in this argument. To this end, I characterize semantic closure in terms of two basic notions: *semantic content* and *semantic sortal*. The semantic content of a linguistic expression is just the meaning of that expression as it is commonly used by the speakers of the language. For example, the semantic content of the statement 'It will rain this afternoon' is a certain prediction—namely, that it will rain this afternoon. A semantic sortal is a semantic property that partitions the statements of the given language (perhaps exhaustively for well-behaved languages that contain no vague terms). Truth, on this account, is a semantic sortal. With these two notions in place, I characterize semantic closure as follows:

(SC) A language is semantically closed if it contains a statement whose semantic content includes a semantic sortal for that language.

This characterization explains why any language capable of expressing the Liar is semantically closed, as part of the semantic content of the statement of the paradox is a semantic sortal (viz. falsity) for the language in which the statement is expressed. We should note, however, that semantic closure provides for the possibility of expressing non-paradoxical statements. 'This sentence is true' is such a statement. It is not, as the

Liar is, self-inconsistent, but its expressibility is possible only in a language that is semantically closed.

This is just a sketch of what Tarski had in mind, but it will serve my present purposes adequately well. More importantly, the normative thrust of Tarski's work is not to be missed: semantically closed languages are inconsistent and are therefore to be avoided wherever possible.

The considerations behind semantic closure apply in an analogous way to domains of thought objects, or conceptual schemes. Whereas a language consists (in part) of statements, a conceptual scheme consists (in part) of thought objects. Whereas statements have semantic content, thought objects have conceptual content. And whereas statements are subject to partitioning by semantic sortals (not all statements are true, for example) thought objects are subject to partitioning by conceptual sortals (as not all thought objects are *bona fide* objects). I want to suggest that conceptual schemes are subject to a variety of closure that is for them what semantic closure is for languages. To be more specific:

(CC) A domain of thought objects is conceptually closed if it contains a thought object whose conceptual content includes a conceptual sortal for that domain.

I contend that the conceptual system required for Anselm's argument satisfies this condition for conceptual closure, and can therefore be expected to produce paradoxes analogous to the Liar. Indeed, Modest is just such a paradoxical thought object, and his specification precipitates relatively simply out of the predicates in which Klima's argument is framed when constitutive reference is employed.

The trouble-making predicate is once again '*I*x', as Klima interprets it. For '... exists only in the intellect' is a conceptual sortal, as I have characterized that notion. So the postulation of any thought object whose conceptual content includes the predicate in question (or its negation) will result in conceptual closure. The concept of Modest includes the conceptual sortal as part of its explicit content, since I have defined him thus by stipulation. The Anselmian concept of God does not include the conceptual sortal as part of its explicit content, but it is certainly part of the concept's *implicit* content, as Anselm's argument ably demonstrates. It is, in any event, for a person who uses 'God' to refer constitutively.

Modest is a paradoxical thought object. I have not attempted to show that God is a paradoxical thought object. In fact, I do not believe that there is any paradox inherent in the concept of God. Nonetheless, because using Anselm's 'God' to refer constitutively requires a thought object, part of whose conceptual content is a conceptual sortal, the conceptual scheme of the person who so refers suffers from conceptual closure. And even though 'This sentence is true' by itself poses no threat to consistency, it cannot be allowed into a language without its delinquent counterpart, 'This sentence is false'. If the Liar is to be excluded in the interest of preserving consistency, so too must be the Truth-teller. Similarly, although the concept of God does not by itself render a conceptual scheme inconsistent, one cannot have God without inviting Modest. Therefore, if Modest must not be admitted, neither may God.

It thus seems to me that the atheist has a rather potent objection to Klima's argument. Klima says that the atheist fails to be moved by Anselm's argument simply because he uses the requisite description to make parasitic reference to God. The atheist's response ought to be that his doing so is not a matter of stubbornness; it is

an attempt to avoid paradox and inconsistency. Klima maintains that one *may* in this case employ parasitic reference; the atheist should insist that one *must*.

6. Conclusion

There are at least two noteworthy consequences of general philosophical interest that fall out of this treatment of Klima's argument. The first is just the point that avoiding conceptual closure renders unavailable various arguments that proceed by some form of conceptual analysis. For example, one idealist argument advanced by Berkeley's Philonous can now be seen to require conceptual closure. Philonous questions the very comprehensibility of realist ontologies by claiming that one cannot so much as conceive of the unconceived objects whose existence is affirmed by realism (*Berkeley 1910*). But '... is conceived' functions as a conceptual sortal, so Philonous' invitation to imagine an unconceived object as such (i.e. by constitutive reference) results in conceptual closure, and therefore inconsistency. I think it quite likely that there are other historically notorious arguments that can be dispatched by similar means.

Second, it is quite clear that most of our acts of reference are constitutive in nature, since it is only in rather special circumstances—when we are engaged in a conversation in which we recognize that our conceptual scheme differs in some relevant respect from that of our interlocutor—that we employ parasitic reference. But given how constitutive reference works, any sharp distinction between concepts and simple predicative beliefs is bound to be arbitrary. Referring constitutively requires conceiving of the thought object under a certain description, and so mere acts of reference have a certain propositional character. Indeed, the articulation of a simple predicative belief (e.g. 'Webber is the most significant British composer in history') appears to be nothing more than the specification of a concept, on this view. The implications of this seem to me to be far-reaching, though tracing them out is a task I regrettably must neglect for the time being.

Although his interpretation of Anselm's famous proof fails, I believe that Klima's development of the notions of constitutive and parasitic reference is interesting and significant. I expect that it will be the spark for a good deal of important work in the future.

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