

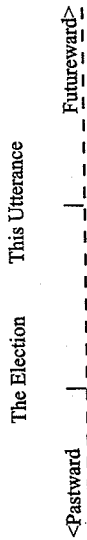
they will see that we need not have used the form of words 'the moment at which . . . occurs'. Here is the trick:

For any moments of time  $x$  and  $y$ , if  $A$  occurs at  $x$  and  $B$  occurs at  $y$ , then  $x$  is before  $y$ .

14. Or, if appropriate, 'this thought'.

15. This use of 'occurs' is supposed not "really" to be in the present tense, but to be "tenseless." We could, if we liked, write 'occurred' in place of 'occurs', provided this use of '-ed' merely reflected an aesthetic preference on our part and not an allegiance to the idea that the past tense corresponded to any real feature of the World. The "tenseless" statement 'The election occurs before this utterance' is supposed to convey no more than what one would convey by saying, "Events are temporally ordered in as shown in this diagram of the time-line," while displaying the diagram:

The reader will note, however, that even this statement contains the apparently tensed verb 'are'!



16. *The Nature of Existence*, Vol. II, §§303-333.

17. Compare note 15 on Russell's "tenseless" sense of 'occurs'.

18. At any rate, (10) follows from (8) and (9) on the assumption that 'past moment' is equivalent to 'moment that IS past' and not to 'moment that is past'. A fuller examination of all the ins and outs of McTaggart's argument would have to raise the question which of these two expressions was the correct reading of 'past moment'.

19. And if we also assume that 'IS a present moment' is equivalent to 'IS a present moment at some moment' and that 'IS a future moment' is equivalent to 'IS a future moment at some moment', these three assumptions will have the consequence that (5) is true.

20. Do 'Denmark is north of Italy' and 'Italy is south of Denmark' mean the same thing? Do they say the same thing in different words? It is perhaps not entirely clear what 'mean the same thing' and 'say the same thing in different words' mean, and the answer to these questions is therefore perhaps a matter of definition. But one thing is clear: these two propositions are logically related in a very specific way: they *must* either be both true or both false. If '4:00 pm October 23rd, 2350 IS a past moment' and '4:00 pm October 23rd, 2350 IS a past moment at some moment' are related in this way, if they *must* be either both true or both false, McTaggart's argument fails.

## 5 OBJECTIVITY

One important component of the Common Western Metaphysic is the thesis that there is such a thing as objective truth. This thesis itself has two components. First, our beliefs and our assertions are either true or false; each of our beliefs and assertions represents the World as being a certain way, and the belief or assertion is true if the World is that way, and false if the World is not that way. It is, as one might put it, up to our beliefs and assertions to get the World right; if they don't, they're not doing their job, and that's their fault and no fault of the World's. Our beliefs and assertions are thus related to the World as a map is related to the territory: it is up to the map to get the territory right, and if the map doesn't get the territory right, that's the fault of the map and no fault of the territory.

The second component of the thesis that there is such a thing as objective truth is this: the World exists and has the features it does in large part independently of our beliefs and our assertions. (I say 'in large part' because our beliefs and assertions are themselves parts—very minor parts, it would seem—of the World. And, of course, our beliefs and assertions may *affect* other parts of the World, as when my false belief that the traffic light is green causes an accident. But even the totality of all the parts of the physical universe affected by the beliefs and assertions of all human beings would seem to be a very small part of the universe: if we learn nothing else from astronomy and geology, we learn that if human beings had never existed, the history and future of the physical universe would be much the same.) The truth or falsity of our beliefs and assertions is therefore "objective" in the sense that truth and falsity are conferred on those beliefs and assertions by their *objects*, by the things they are *about*.

And how do the objects of our beliefs and assertions confer truth on them? The idea that the objects of our beliefs and assertions have this power may seem mysterious if we think about it in the abstract, but the mystery vanishes if we look at one or two concrete examples. If I assert that Albany is the capital of New York State, what I have asserted is true if and only if Albany is the capital of New York State, what I assert if and only if Albany is *not* the capital of New York State and is false if and only if Albany is the capital of New York State. If Berkeley believes that nothing exists independently of the mind, what he believes is true if and only if nothing exists independently of the mind, and what he believes is false if and only if something exists independently of the mind. If two people, you and I, say, have the same belief about something—perhaps we both believe that Albany is the capital of New York State—then truth or falsity is conferred on our common belief by the features of

that one object. Truth is therefore "one"; there is no such thing as a belief or assertion being "true for me" but "not true for you." If your friend Alfred responds to something you have said with the words, "That may be true for you, but it isn't true for me," his words can only be regarded as a rather misleading way of saying, "That may be what you think, but it's not what I think."

Before we go further, it will be necessary to clear up a possible confusion. Many fair-minded people seem to object to the notion of objective truth and falsity because they think it implies some sort of dogmatism. They think that if Mary says that each of our beliefs and assertions is either objectively true or objectively false, then Mary must be setting herself up as an arbiter of that objective truth and falsity. "Who's to say what's true and what's false?" they ask. But Mary is not committed by her belief in the objectivity of truth and falsity to the claim that she is in a position to lay down the law about what's true and what's false. Indeed, she is not committed to the thesis that *anyone* is in a position to lay down the law about what's true and what's false. She is committed only to the thesis that truth and falsity exist and are (in general) conferred on beliefs and assertions independently of what is going on in the minds of the people who have those beliefs and make those assertions. One example should suffice to make this clear. Consider the question whether there is intelligent life on other planets. "Who's to say whether there's intelligent life on other planets?" Who, indeed? In my view, no human being at this point in history is in a position to lay down the law on this question. But saying that is perfectly consistent with saying that either there is intelligent life on other planets or there isn't, and that the statement that there is intelligent life on other planets is made true (if it is true) or made false (if it is false) by facts about the way things are on distant planets—facts that are the way they are independently of our existence and our beliefs and our desires.

The thesis that each of our beliefs and assertions is either true or false, if it is to be at all plausible, requires two qualifications, qualifications most adherents of the Common Western Metaphysic will be willing to make. The first is that it may well be that some of our utterances are meaningless, although they do not seem to us to be meaningless when we make them—otherwise, we should no doubt not make them. (We have seen, for example, that the logical positivists held that all metaphysical utterances were meaningless. But they did not hold that metaphysical utterances seemed to the metaphysicians who made them to be meaningless.) In the works of the nineteenth-century American Absolute Idealist Josiah Royce, there occurs the following sentence: "The world is a progressively self-realizing community of interpretation". Perhaps these words mean nothing at all—perhaps, as we say, they are "just words"—despite the fact that many people have thought they meant something true and important. If this sentence is indeed meaningless, the thesis that each of our beliefs and assertions is either true or false does not, properly understood, mean that someone who utters this sentence says something that is either true or false, for that person says nothing at all.

The second qualification our thesis requires has to do with vagueness. Most of the words we use in everyday life are vague. That is, for most words there will be possible—and usually actual—cases in which it is not clear whether that word can be correctly applied. For example, if a man is 181.5 centimeters (5 feet 11 and 1/2 inches) tall, there is perhaps no definite answer to the question whether he is "tall." The word 'tall' is therefore vague, and the statement that Alfred (who is 181.5 centimeters tall) is

tall cannot be said to be either true or false. The thesis that each of our beliefs and assertions is either true or false therefore requires this qualification: because many of the words and phrases we use in making our assertions and formulating our beliefs are vague, there will sometimes be no definite yes-or-no answer to the question whether these words and phrases apply to the things we are talking about. As a consequence, some of our beliefs and assertions will be neither true nor false. Let us call such beliefs and assertions *indeterminate*. Believers in objective truth and falsity do not deny the existence of indeterminate beliefs and assertions. They simply insist that the status "indeterminate" is as much an objective status of certain beliefs and assertions as "truth" and "falsity" are of certain others. If, for example, Alfred's hero-worshipping ten-year-old brother believes that Alfred is tall, facts whose existence is independent of what is going on in the boy's mind confer the status "indeterminate" on his belief. In the remainder of this chapter, I will simplify the discussion by ignoring the status "indeterminate"; I will talk as if the thesis of the objectivity of truth implied that every belief and assertion was either true or false. That is, I will ignore the existence of vagueness, which is not really germane to the questions we shall be considering.

Before leaving the topic of vagueness and what it implies about truth and falsity, however, I want to make just one more point. The fact that our language contains vague words and phrases does not entail that a given assertion (or belief) cannot be true or false unless it can be made (or formulated) without the use of vague words. If that were so, few if any of our assertions or beliefs would be either true or false, owing to the fact that most of the words we use in our daily speech are vague. Most of the assertions that we make using vague words manage to be either true or false, owing to the fact that for just about any vague word there are perfectly clear cases of things that word applies to, and people do not normally use a word if they are in any doubt about whether it applies to whatever they are talking about. Although there are certainly people who cannot be clearly said to be "tall" and cannot be clearly said to be "not tall," there are also many people the word 'tall' clearly applies to or clearly does not apply to—for example, men who are 200 centimeters tall, or men who are 150 centimeters tall. Thus, anyone who says that Bertram (who is 200 centimeters [6 feet 7 inches] tall) is tall says something true, and anyone who says that Charles (who is 150 centimeters [4 feet 11 inches] tall) is tall says something false.

With these two qualifications of the thesis that each of our assertions and beliefs is either true or false in mind, let us return to our discussion of the question of objective truth.

The most interesting thing about objective truth is that there are people who deny that it exists. One might wonder how anyone could deny that there is such a thing as objective truth. At least I might. In fact, I often have. For some people, I am fairly sure, the explanation is something like this. They are deeply hostile to the thought of anything that in any sense stands in judgment over them. The idea toward which they are most hostile is, of course, the idea of there being a God. But they are almost as hostile to the idea of there being an objective universe that doesn't care what they think and could make their most cherished beliefs false without even consulting them. (But this cannot be the whole story, since there are people who deny that objective truth exists and who also believe in God. I have to admit, therefore, that the notion of a world devoid of objective truth must have some sort of appeal that is simply

hidden from me.) Let the reader be warned. It must be evident that I am unable to enter into the smallest degree of imaginative sympathy with those who deny that there is such a thing as objective truth. I am therefore probably not a reliable guide to their views. Perhaps, indeed, I do not understand these views. I should like to think so. I should prefer to think that no one actually believes what, on the surface at least, it very much looks as if some people believe.

Philosophers who deny the existence of objective truth are today usually called "anti-realists"—in opposition, of course, to "realists," who affirm the existence of objective truth. This is confusing, because, in our discussion of the external world, we have opposed realism to *idealism*, to the thesis that everything that exists is a mind or a modification of a mind. (And it was no arbitrary decision on my part to use the term 'realism' this way. In opposing "realism" to idealism, I was following customary usage.) It could be argued that it is not entirely misleading to use the word 'realism' both for the thesis that is opposed to idealism and for the thesis that is opposed to "anti-realism." Is not idealism essentially the thesis that there is no mind-independent world "out there" for our sensations to be correct or incorrect representations of? And is not anti-realism the thesis that there is no mind-independent world "out there" for our assertions to be true or false statements about? Since the two theses are both rejections of a mind-independent world, is it so very misleading to oppose both of them to "realism," the thesis that there is a so-called real—that is, mind-independent—world?

This plausible-sounding argument depends on confusing two different senses of 'mind-independent'. The idealist who says that nothing is independent of the mind means that the nature of everything there is is mental: everything is either a mind or a modification of a mind or a collection of modifications of various minds. Nevertheless, according to the idealist, the general nature of reality, the way the World is, *how things are*, is something that does not depend on the mind. (Not even on the mind of God, although, of course, vast ranges of particular fact depend on His decisions—just as much smaller ranges of particular fact depend on your decisions and mine.) The anti-realist who says that nothing is independent of the mind, however, really does mean something very much like this: the collective activity of all minds is somehow determinative of the general nature of reality. What exactly the anti-realist does mean is a question we shall have to turn to in a moment. For the present, we must simply note that although the idealist and the anti-realist may both use the words 'nothing is independent of the mind', they mean something very different by these words. It is therefore misleading to oppose "realism" to both idealism and anti-realism.

Let us respect both the traditional opposition of realism and idealism and the current tendency to use 'realism' for the thesis that there is an objective truth; we can carry out this resolution by the simple expedient of retaining the traditional opposition of 'realism' and 'idealism' and calling the thesis that there is an objective truth 'Realism' with a capital R. (The thesis that there is no objective truth, or that the way the World is is mind-dependent, will, of course, be called anti-Realism.)

What, then, is the thesis of anti-Realism? I confess I have had a very hard time finding a statement of anti-Realism I can understand. I find, in fact, that I am much better at understanding examples of how particular "truths" or "facts" that would be supposed by most people to be independent of the mind are in fact (according to the

anti-Realists) mind-dependent than I am at understanding formulations of anti-Realism as a general doctrine. Let us look at an example of such a particular truth and see what light it can give us. Here is an example of a fact most people would say was in no way dependent upon the existence of the human mind or any activity of or fact about the human mind:

Mount Everest is 8,849.87 meters high.

Let us call this fact 'F'. F would seem to be a pretty good example of a fact most people would take to be, in any reasonable sense, independent of human mental activity. The reasons underlying this conviction might be articulated and presented in the form of an argument in the following way. This argument, although it may appeal to some scientific facts not everyone is familiar with (and some people will reject the assumption it contains that human beings are the product of an evolutionary process), can certainly be said—scientific details aside—to represent the metaphysical point of view of the ordinary person:

The forces that cause mountains to rise have never been in the smallest degree influenced by the evolutionary processes that produced human beings. If no human beings had ever evolved, and if no other intelligent beings inhabited the earth, the vast, slow collision of the Indo-Australian and the Eurasian tectonic plates, which is what caused (and is still causing) the rise of the Himalayan Mountains, would have occurred in exactly the fashion in which it did. And, as a consequence, if there had never been any intelligent beings on the earth, Mount Everest would, despite the absence of intelligence from the terrestrial scene, have exactly the size and shape it has in fact. If you think about it, this conclusion is presupposed by geologists' explanations of the present-day features of the earth, for these explanations presuppose that the processes that shaped these features had been going on for unimaginably long periods during which there were no intelligent beings to observe them or to think about them. Now since Mount Everest would be of exactly the size and shape it actually is even if there had never been any minds, it is obvious that the fact F is entirely independent of all human mental activity. If there were no beings with minds, there would be no one to observe or grasp or be aware of this fact, but the fact would still *be there*.

This argument, it will be noted, presupposes that common objects can exist independently of the mind and therefore presupposes the falsity of idealism, and the idealists, as we have said, are no friends of anti-Realism. Still, we have found reason to reject idealism, and there seems to be no reason to restrict ourselves to the use of arguments acceptable to idealists. (I am tempted to say: Let the idealists find their own arguments against anti-Realism.) There is, however, an argument Berkeley has used against this kind of reasoning that an anti-Realist might want to appropriate, and we had better take a moment to examine it. It is this: it is impossible to imagine geological processes—or anything else—going on independently of the mind, for if you try, you will find you have to imagine *yourself* (or at least *someone*) present and watching the processes take place; therefore, you do not succeed in your attempt to imagine the processes in question going on independently of the mind. (Most undergraduates will probably have heard the similar argument for the conclusion that it is

impossible for one to imagine one's own funeral: one would have to imagine oneself there, watching what was going on, so one would not really be imagining oneself *dead*, so one would not really be imagining one's funeral.)

This argument is without force, however. Even if we grant the premise that one cannot imagine, in the sense of "form a mental image of," an event no one is observing, the argument is without force. (And that premise is very doubtful. To say one cannot imagine an event no one is observing is like saying one cannot paint a picture of someone who is alone—since any attempt to do so would represent the figure in the painting as observed by someone who was occupying a certain point of view, the point of view that the viewer of the painting is invited, in imagination, to share.) The above argument for the mind-independence of F does not require that those to whom the argument is addressed form a *mental image* of unobserved geological processes but only that they understand certain verbal descriptions of those processes.

What does the anti-Realist say about F? How can the anti-Realist continue to maintain that the way the World is is dependent on human mental activity in the face of the fact that the size and shape of Mount Everest were determined by geological processes operating mostly before and always independently of the biological processes that produced intelligent life? The argument goes something like this:

Mountains and height are human social constructs. Let us first consider mountains. It is a human fiction, one that has gained currency because it serves certain social needs, that a certain portion of the earth's topography can be marked off and called a "mountain." What are the boundaries of Mount Everest? If you look at the place where these boundaries are supposed to be, you will not find any line on the surface of the earth; you will find only homogeneous rock. If you want to find out where Mount Everest begins and ends, you will discover that you have to apply to certain social institutions for your answer—the International Geographical Union or some such. And the answer you get will not be dictated by some "reality" that is independent of the activities of human beings. The International Geographical Union—or whoever is responsible for such decisions—might just as well ("just as well" as far as any mind-independent reality enters into the matter) have decided that a "mountain" began at the tree line, and they might have decided to call what we call the part of the mountain below the tree line the 'mountain base'. The fact that they made the decision they did about the boundaries of mountains and not some other decision has a social explanation, like any other social fact. Perhaps it is this: some people want to or have to climb mountains, and it serves their purposes to draw the boundaries around "mountains" at the place where the specifically human activity called climbing has to start. (Intelligent birds would not have that particular purpose; they might well draw the boundaries around "mountains" differently—if, indeed, they drew any such boundaries at all.) Mountains, therefore, are social constructs. So is height. You can't drop a weighted rope from the peak of Mount Everest to the ground and then measure the rope with a meter stick and call the result the height of Mount Everest. We therefore have to use a special instrument called a theodolite to measure the height of Mount Everest. But why do we call the both the figure that a certain procedure involving a theodolite gives us with respect to Mount Everest *and* the figure that measuring a weighted rope gives us with respect to a certain tower the "height" of the thing measured? The answer is that we do this because we have found it socially useful to establish a

convention to the effect that a single quality is measured by these two very different procedures. Height is therefore a social construct. (It is true that if we used the theodolite to measure the "height" of the tower, it would give the same figure as the weighted rope. But that's not a reflection of some fact about an extra-social reality called height; it's rather a reflection of a certain social fact, namely the procedure we use for calibrating theodolites. If the theodolite did not give the same result as the weighted rope, we would recalibrate the theodolite.) Both mountains and height, therefore, are social constructs, and it follows that "facts" about the height of mountains are social facts. Facts about the height of mountains before there were any people (or facts about what the height of certain mountains would have been if there had never been any people) are no less social facts. They are simply facts about the way in which we apply social constructs retrospectively (or hypothetically). If we wanted, we could adopt quite different conventions about how to apply those constructs in discourse about the distant past. We could adopt the convention that before, say, 1,000,000 B.C., everything was just one-half the size things were before that date according to our present system of conventions. We don't do this because it would make our geological and evolutionary and astronomical theories harder to state and harder to use. But ease of statement and use is a requirement we impose on our theories because of our interests. If we were to meet Martians who did adopt such a convention because it satisfied *their* interests—aesthetic interests, perhaps, or interests we couldn't understand at all—nothing but human chauvinism could lead us to say they were wrong. Who are we to dictate their interests?

This is, or so I maintain, a fair sample of the way in which anti-Realists argue. (Their argument for the general thesis of anti-Realism would simply be an application of what has been said in this passage about the supposedly mind-independent fact F to all supposedly mind-independent facts.) If this is the extent of the anti-Realists' case, I do not find it very impressive, for the reason that, in my opinion, it does not establish the mind-dependence of facts like F.

Let us first consider the case of Mount Everest. Let us grant for the sake of argument everything our imaginary anti-Realist has said about the social interests served by our drawing the boundaries around the things we call "mountains" the way we do. Let us grant that we might have drawn these boundaries differently if we had had different interests. Still, we *have* drawn these boundaries in a certain way, and—or so it would seem—in drawing them this way we have picked out certain objects as the objects designated by names like 'Mount Everest', 'Pikes Peak', 'the Matterhorn', and so on, and there are certain properties that *these* objects will turn out to have when we get round to examining them. They will turn out to have these properties because they already have them, for these properties belong to these objects independently of the human mind and human conventions and human interests and human social activities. If we had adopted different conventions about where to draw the boundaries of mountains, then 'Mount Everest', which in fact designates the object *x*, an object that is 8,849.87 meters high, would have designated some other object *y*, an object that (no doubt) has some other height. But this is merely a fact about the names things have or might have had, and the height of a thing is not affected by what people call it or by whether they call it anything. No

matter how we had chosen to use 'Mount Everest', the objects  $x$  and  $y$  would still be there, and  $x$  would still be 8,849.87 meters high, and the object  $y$  would still have whatever height it does have.

But doesn't this line of reasoning neglect the contention of the anti-Realists that properties like height, as well as physical objects like mountains, are "social constructs"? The same points apply to this contention. Height is a "social construct" only in the sense that it is a matter of social convention what property (if any) is assigned to the word 'height' as its meaning. (No doubt the fact that a certain property has been chosen to be the meaning of some abstract noun will typically be explained by the fact that some social interest is served by having a word whose meaning is that property. The Realist will concede this rather obvious thesis, which is in no way damaging to Realism.)

The social convention that assigns a particular property to the word 'height' is simply a social convention to the effect that the word 'height' is to be used as a name for what is measured by a certain set of procedures. The word 'height' might have been used as a name for what is measured by some different set of procedures. For example, what we call the 'height' of a mountain is measured in meters (or whatever) above sea level. Sea level was chosen as our bench mark because the system of measurement so established satisfies certain of our interests. Other bench marks could have been used, however. If we had chosen to employ one of these other bench marks, we might have had not only different *figures* for the heights of various mountains (perhaps 8,773.12 meters instead of 8,849.87 meters for the height of Mount Everest) but different answers to questions of the form 'Is Mount A or Mount B the higher mountain?'

But it does not follow that it is a matter of social convention what the height of Mount Everest is or whether Mount Alfred is higher than Mount Beatrice. All that follows is a fact about English usage: given the actual conventions for using the word 'height' (and related phrases like 'higher than'), the string of English words 'Mount Alfred is higher than Mount Beatrice' expresses a certain thesis  $x$ ; if a certain different convention governed the usage of English-speakers, this string of English words would express the distinct thesis  $y$ . And it is consistent with these facts about the conventions that govern (or might have governed) English usage to suppose that  $x$  is true and  $y$  is false, the respective truth and falsity of these two theses being things that are not determined by our social conventions, since they depend only on the way in which masses of rock have been molded over the aeons by geological forces—forces that operate in serene indifference to social convention. Here is another way to express what is essentially the same point. Suppose we invent a word to designate the property that 'height' would have designated if we had adopted the other conventional bench mark we have been imagining. Let the word be 'schmeight'. (And we have the related verbal inventions 'schmigh' and 'schmigher than'.) Then all the following statements may well be simultaneously true (*objectively* true):

- Mount Everest is 8,849.87 meters high.
- Mount Everest is 8,773.12 meters schmigh.
- Mount Alfred is higher than Mount Beatrice.
- Mount Beatrice is schmigher than Mount Alfred.

All the impressive-sounding thesis that "height is a social construct" really comes to, therefore, is this: if we had adopted a certain different set of conventions for using the word 'high', then the first sentence in the above list would mean, 'Mount Everest is 8,849.87 meters schmigh' and the third sentence would mean 'Mount Alfred is schmigher than Mount Beatrice'—which is false if (as the fourth sentence asserts) Mount Beatrice is schmigher than Mount Alfred. This harmless thesis—which is, of course, perfectly acceptable to the Realist—is not a premise from which anti-Realism can be deduced.

Not only does the "social construct" argument fail to establish any thesis that could reasonably be called anti-Realism, but our application of this argument to the case of the fact F (which certainly looks like a mind-independent fact) fails to provide us with any clue as to what thesis anti-Realism is. What the proponent of the "social construct" argument says about the fact F turns out to be, when it is properly understood, something perfectly consistent with Realism. And, therefore, anti-Realism cannot simply be a generalization to all facts of what the proponent of the "social construct" argument is represented above as saying about the fact F.

I am of the opinion that we can do more than simply show that a certain argument for anti-Realism fails to establish that thesis—or any thesis incompatible with Realism. (That, after all, is a very weak result, for the anti-Realist might have other arguments.) We can present a very strong argument against anti-Realism. Now one might wonder how I could promise a strong argument against a thesis when, by my own testimony, I not really know what that thesis is. But nothing mysterious is being proposed. I do not fully understand anti-Realism, but I do understand some of the features anti-Realism is supposed to have. The anti-Realists have ascribed various features to anti-Realism, and many of these features are clearly taken by the anti-Realists to be essential to anti-Realism: any thesis that did not have those features would not be anti-Realism. The argument I shall present has this conclusion: any thesis that combines these features must be incoherent.

In order to see this, let us consider some brief statement of anti-Realism. It will make no real difference what brief statement we choose or how well we understand it. Let us choose the following statement, which we shall call AR:

Objective truth and falsity do not exist.

Now let us enquire about the status of AR itself—according to AR. AR is a statement about all statements, and it is therefore a statement about itself. What does it say about itself? Well, just what it says about all other statements: that it is neither objectively true nor objectively false. And, of course, it follows from this that it is not objectively true. If it is not objectively true, if it is not true in virtue of corresponding to a reality independent of human mental activity, what is it—according to the anti-Realists? What status do they ascribe to it? No doubt the anti-Realists will say they ascribe the same status to it as they ascribe to statements like '17 + 18 = 35' and 'Lions are carnivorous' and deny to statements like '14 ÷ 12 = 7' and 'Snails are aquatic mammals'. And what status is that? "Well," says the anti-Realist—at least many anti-Realists say something like this—"these statements fit in with our experience, and their denials go against our experience. For example, I have seen lions eating meat, I have never seen any eating vegetables, their teeth are obviously fitted for meat and not for vegetables,

all the lion experts say lions are carnivorous, and so on. You Realists admit that there is such a status as this. It's just the status that leads you to accept or believe certain statements. And you concede that there are statements that have this status and are nevertheless not what you call 'objectively true,' since you concede that a misleading series of experiences could cause someone to accept, say, the statement that lions are herbivorous, which you regard as 'objectively false.' Well, we anti-Realists simply don't see the need for these two additional statuses you call 'objectively true' and 'objectively false.' We are content with the statuses 'fits in with our experience' and 'goes against our experience.' To answer your question, it is the former of these two statuses that I ascribe to AR: it fits in with our experience."

But what does the anti-Realist mean by saying, "AR fits in with our experience"? What is this "fitting in"? The way AR fits in with our experience cannot be much like the way 'Lions are carnivorous' fits in with our experience. If one were to reject the latter statement and were to proceed on the assumption that lions were herbivorous, one might get eaten. This fact, and many others like it, provide a fairly robust sense in which the statement that lions are carnivorous "fits in with" our experience and in which its denial "goes against" our experience: if one does not accept this statement, and particularly if one accepts its denial, one may very well get into serious trouble, trouble one's experiences will make it very clear to one that one is in. The same is true of highly theoretical scientific statements like 'Many of the important properties of water are due to hydrogen bonding' and 'Gravity is a function of the curvature of spacetime', although in the case of such statements, the "trouble" will typically reveal itself only in very special circumstances (just the circumstances laboratories are designed to produce and astronomical observatories are designed to search out in the heavens). Mathematical statements, too, can be said to fit in with our experience in this sense; if we accept the wrong mathematical statements, our checks will bounce and our bridges will fall down.

But in what sense can a very abstract philosophical statement like AR be said to fit in with our experience? Suppose that Andrew is an anti-Realist and Rachel is a Realist. Are there any possible circumstances in which Rachel will get in trouble because she rejects AR and in which Andrew will avoid trouble because he accepts AR? It is absurd to suppose that Andrew is less likely than Rachel to be eaten by a lion or to propose a scientific theory that is refuted by experiment or to design a bridge that falls down. Andrew may say that he will produce better philosophical theories than Rachel will, but this statement would not seem to be consistent with his account of what is "good" about some statements and "bad" about others—theories are, after all, special kinds of statements—unless the qualities of his theories that make them "better" than Rachel's theories somehow reveal themselves to our experience. And this—making predictions about how our experiences will go—is just what philosophical theories unlike scientific theories, notoriously do not do.

Or, at any rate, that is what philosophical theories notoriously do not do if by experience we mean sense-experience. Perhaps, however, the anti-Realist is thinking of experience in a broader sense than this. If there were some knockdown argument for AR, that fact might establish the anti-Realist's contention that this statement fits in with our experience, for one sort of experience we have is the experience of examining arguments and finding them compelling. Whether or not this would do the trick,

however, it is not something we have. There are, as we have observed, no knockdown arguments in philosophy. There are no philosophical arguments that all qualified philosophers regard as compelling.

If there were arguments for AR that seemed to the majority of philosophers definitely to outweigh all the known arguments against AR, that fact might be enough to establish the anti-Realist's contention that AR fits in with our experience. But, again, whether or not this would do the trick, it is not something we have, for, as matters stand, this is not how things seem to the majority of philosophers.

It seems, therefore, that there is no clear sense in which AR can be said to "fit in with our experience." Suppose, then, that the anti-Realist were to give up on "us" and retreat to "me"; suppose that the anti-Realist were to say something like "The 'good' feature I ascribe to statements like 'Lions are carnivorous' and AR and deny to others like 'Snails are aquatic mammals' and 'Objective truth and falsity exist' is just this: fitting in with *my* experience." Suppose our anti-Realist, Andrew, does say this. What can Rachel the Realist say in reply? Here is one possibility.

A. Objective truth and falsity do not exist.

R. If I understand your theory, when you make that statement you are claiming no more for it than that it fits in with your own experience. Well, you should know. Apparently, when you consider the arguments for AR, you find them convincing: you have that experience. I shouldn't dream of disputing your claim to find those arguments convincing. And you, I'm sure, wouldn't dream of disputing *my* claim to have the experience of finding the arguments *against* AR compelling. So you can have no objection to my saying, as I do: Objective truth and falsity exist.

A. But that statement goes against my experience.

R. According to your theory, that would be a ground for objecting if *you* made the statement, "Objective truth and falsity exist." But why should you regard it as a ground for objecting when I make that statement?—unless you think I'm lying when I assure you that when I consider the philosophical arguments against AR I have the experience of finding them compelling. Whatever one may say against Realism, it at least makes disagreement intelligible: according to Realism, when two people disagree about a statement, one of them says it has the "good" feature *objective truth* and the other says it lacks it. But, according to you, when you say "Objective truth and falsity do not exist" and I say "Objective truth and falsity exist," each of those statements has the only "good" feature whose existence you admit: each of them fits in with the experience of the person who made it. Or did you really mean that there is just one "good" feature that can belong to any statement, no matter who makes it—namely, fitting in with *your* experience? If you do mean that, I'm afraid your theory isn't going to win many adherents beyond the one it already has.

Rachel, I believe, has an excellent point. If Andrew can find no "replacement" for truth but "fits in with my own, personal experience," then (assuming Andrew isn't really proposing that everyone use "fits in with *Andrew's* experience" as a replacement for truth) he is proposing a theory according to which the philosopher who says "Objec-

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 tive truth and falsity exist" and the philosopher who says "Objective truth and falsity do not exist" are not in disagreement. And this is an absurd consequence. The avenue we have been exploring, therefore, the avenue opened by the suggestion that each individual person has a "private" substitute for truth, has turned out to be a dead end. Let us suppose, therefore, that anti-Realism must postulate a single substitute for truth, one that is the same for everyone.

In that case, however, it seems that anti-Realism is self-refuting: anti-Realism seems to tell us not to accept AR—that is, not to accept anti-Realism. The anti-Realists, if they are to make a convincing case for anti-Realism, must propose a substitute for objective truth; they must specify a feature "good" statements like 'Lions are carnivorous' have and "bad" statements like 'Snails are aquatic mammals' lack. But they have conspicuously failed to find a substitute for truth that satisfies the following two conditions: (a) all the uncontroversially "good" statements have it and all the uncontroversially "bad" statements lack it, and (b) anti-Realism has it.

In the preceding discussion, we considered one such substitute for truth: fitting in with our experiences and having a denial that goes against our experiences. Anti-Realists have offered other substitutes for truth than this, but I am convinced that my general criticism holds: it always seems that anti-Realism itself lacks the anti-Realist's proposed substitute for truth. (One famous—or notorious—anti-Realist has proposed the following substitute: a statement is one of the "good" ones if one's peers will let one get away with making it. Most of his peers have greeted this proposal with expressions of outrage or amusement, depending on their temperaments, which would seem to be a pretty clear example of not letting someone get away with something.) Realists face no such problem. Their position is simply that Realism is objectively true and that anti-Realism is objectively false. Whatever other problems Realism may face, it does not say of itself that it should not be accepted.

Our argument against anti-Realism is in some ways similar to the argument presented in Chapter 1 for the conclusion that there is such a thing as ultimate reality, a reality that lies behind all appearances. This is no accident, for one consequence of anti-Realism is that the distinction between appearance and reality is a distinction that can be applied only in certain limited contexts and that, therefore, the notion of an ultimate reality—a reality whose status as reality is independent of context—is incoherent. If there were such a context-independent reality, there would be such a thing as objective truth: those statements would be objectively true that correctly described the ultimate or context-independent reality. It is therefore misleading to think of anti-Realism as a metaphysic, in the sense in which idealism or lower-case-r realism is a metaphysic. Anti-Realism, rather, is a denial of the possibility of metaphysics, since the very enterprise of metaphysics is the attempt to discover the nature of ultimate reality. And Realism is a metaphysic only in the sense that it is a thesis common to all metaphysical theories.

I propose that, given the very plausible "geological" arguments for Realism, and given the apparently self-refuting nature of anti-Realism, we should be Realists.

Before we leave the topic of Realism and anti-Realism, however, I should like to direct the reader's attention to the greatest of all attacks on anti-Realism, George Orwell's novel *1984*. Anyone who is interested in Realism and anti-Realism should be steeped in the message of this book. The reader is particularly directed to the climax

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 of the novel, the debate between the Realist Winston Smith and the anti-Realist O'Brien. In the end, there is only one question that can be addressed to the anti-Realist: How does your position differ from O'Brien's?

This completes our promised discussion of four important issues raised by the question whether a statement of the Common Western Metaphysic is a description of appearance or reality. As we remarked earlier, there are many other issues that are raised by this question, issues that have bulked large in the history of metaphysics. Some of these issues will be addressed in later chapters. There is, for example, the issue of what metaphysicians call "persistence through time" or "the identity of an object across time," the problem of whether one and the same object can (as the Common Western Metaphysic alleges) exist at two different times. We shall discuss that problem in connection with our discussion of human beings, since it is human beings whose persistence through time we care most deeply about; because of this concern we have about the persistence of human beings, it will be important to examine the consequences of any theory of persistence for the special case of human beings, and, for that reason, we postpone discussion of persistence till Chapter 11.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

It is very hard to find anything about the Realism/anti-Realism debate to recommend to the beginning student of metaphysics. Almost everything that has been written on this topic is either forbiddingly technical or else forbiddingly obscure (or both). Two happy exceptions are John Searle's *The Construction of Social Reality* and Thomas Nagel's *The Last Word*. With some reservations, I recommend four other works. The first is rather on the technical side. The remaining three, although they contain many sections that are clear enough, are rather unclear on the matter of exactly what it is the authors believe. Alston's "Yes, Virginia, There Is a Real World" is a defense of Realism. Putnam's *Reason, Truth and History* (see particularly the first three chapters) and *The Many Faces of Realism* (see particularly Lectures I and II) represent the anti-Realist point of view, as does Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

## Part Two

# WHY THE WORLD IS

### Introduction to Part Two

In Part One, we considered various arguments and speculations concerning the features of the World. But why is there a World at all? Why is anything *there* to have the features we argued and speculated about—or any other features, any features at all? Why is there something rather than nothing? One cannot plausibly argue that this is an illegitimate question owing to the fact that if there were nothing we should not be here to ask it. After all, essentially the same argument could be addressed to the astronomer who asked why the sun had planets or to the biologist who inquired into the origin of life, and everyone agrees that questions about the origin of the planets or of life are legitimate questions. It does not follow, however, that the question, Why is there something rather than nothing? is a legitimate question, and it is undeniable that in some respects it is strikingly unlike questions about the origin of the planets or of life.

The philosopher who asks why there is anything at all faces a difficulty to which nothing in the inquiries of our astronomer and our biologist corresponds. Before there were planets, before there was life, there were already lots of things, and the problem of explaining the origin of the planets or the origin of life is just the problem of explaining how those already-existing things interacted to produce the planets or to produce life. But before there was anything—if indeed the world ‘before’ makes any sense in this context—there was, of course, nothing. And how can ‘nothing’ serve as the basis of an explanation? If nothing exists, nothing is going on. If nothing exists, nothing has any properties that can be used in giving an explanation—as can the properties of a ‘pre-planetary’ nebula surrounding the sun or the properties of the ‘pre-biotic soup’ some have said was the arena within which life developed. ‘Nothing’ has no parts that could interact with one another or display contrasting properties. For that matter, ‘nothing’ has no parts that could fail to interact with one another or fail to display contrasting properties.

In fact, the word ‘nothing’ is not a name at all, although our use of the word in double quotes in the last few sentences might suggest that it is a name. Surrounding the word ‘nothing’ with double quotes makes the word look as if it were supposed to function as a sort of nickname for a vast emptiness or an enormous vacuum. But to regard the word ‘nothing’ as functioning in that way would be to misunderstand it. To say



there is nothing is to say there isn't *anything*, not even a vast emptiness. If there were a vast emptiness, there would be no material objects—no atoms or elementary particles or anything made of them—but there would nevertheless be something: the vast emptiness.

If it seems implausible to suppose that an emptiness is something, a thing, consider the fact that we have qualified this emptiness with an adjective: 'vast'. To say of something that it is vast is to say it has a size, and only a *thing* can have a size—or any other property or feature or characteristic. One can of course see why someone would say there would be nothing if there were only a vast emptiness. For that matter, one can see why someone would say that a room "contained nothing" (or there was "nothing in" the room) if there were no furniture or other large, solid objects in it. When we talk about what is in a room, we are generally thinking of large, solid objects like pieces of furniture. And if you said, "Well, we could move all those things into Janice's old bedroom. There's nothing in there now. It's completely empty," you would probably regard it as a tedious joke if someone replied that you were mistaken because the room contained lots of air and water vapor and millions of dust motes. Nevertheless, what the tedious humorist said would be *true*. And the same applies to the vast emptiness. If we said, "If there were only a vast emptiness, there would be nothing," we should no doubt mean that there would be nothing of the sort we are usually interested in—things made of atoms or elementary particles—and the statement that there would still be a vast emptiness would be regarded as a tedious joke. Nevertheless, it would be *true* that there was still a vast emptiness, for spatial extent would still exist, and there couldn't even be spatial extent if there were really *nothing*.

When it is fully appreciated what "There is nothing" means when these words are taken in the strictest sense, it becomes evident how strange and difficult the question 'Why is there anything at all?' is. The question 'Why is there life on the earth?' may be difficult, but it is easy enough to see in a very general way what sort of thing would count as an answer to it. The question would be answered by someone's showing how a state of affairs in which there were no living things but lots of non-living things developed into a state of affairs in which there were both non-living and living things. The person who answered the question would show how non-living things interacted and came together and arranged themselves to produce living things. But no one is going to show how a state of affairs in which there were no things of any sort developed into a state of affairs in which there were things. No one is going to show how non-existent things interacted and came together and rearranged themselves to produce existent things. To undertake such an explanation would be to undertake nonsense, for, just as 'nothing' is not a name of a thing, so 'non-existent thing' is not a name of a kind of thing. Words like 'dragon' and 'unicorn' are not names for kinds of non-existent things. Rather, they are not names for anything of any sort, for there are no dragons or unicorns for them to name.

The strangeness of our question, if not its difficulty, doubtless explains why it has occurred only to philosophers. One might expect that the religions of the world would have offered various explanations of why there was something rather than nothing. But it is in fact only under the impetus provided by philosophical speculation that any religion has provided an explanation, be it profound or silly, plausible or implausible, of the fact that there is something rather than nothing. It is true that the adherents of many re-

ligions tell stories that our culture describes as "creation myths"; it is often stories are primitive attempts to explain the beginnings of things. I do these stories really were attempts to *explain* the beginnings of things, but pose to go into that question. The point I want to make is that none of these stories even pretends to answer the question, Why should there be anything at all? This is immediately evident when we read them with that question in mind. Here is a story that is typical of a large range of "creation myths," despite the fact that I have made it up.

Once there was nothing but a great sea of mud. The god Unwilt rose in this sea of mud like a bubble. When he had reached the surface, he gave birth to the god Um from his mouth and the goddess Usk from his navel. Um and Usk fell upon their father and devoured his flesh, but his bones they did not eat. Then Um lay with Usk and she bore him seven gods and seven goddesses, whom Um and Usk commanded to build a great palace for them. But the gods and goddesses grew weary of this task and they begged Um and Usk to make servants for them to help them in their labors. Um and Usk had pity on their children, and from the bones of their father Unwilt they made Ea, the first man, and Iwa, the first woman.

We may note that this story says nothing about where the great sea of mud came from or how long it had been there or what lay outside its borders or why a god should rise in it like a bubble or why he would have a navel. The story does not begin with there being nothing. It does not even begin with a vast emptiness. When the curtain rises, there is already something on the stage. It might be objected that this grotesque little tale is modeled on very primitive creation stories. But if we look at "purer" or "more highly developed" traditional creation stories, we still find the stage occupied when the curtain rises:

The god Tagalao lived in the far spaces. He created all things. He was alone, there was no heaven, no earth. He was alone and wandered about in space.<sup>1</sup>

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.<sup>2</sup>

In the Samoan story, the god Tagalao is on stage when the curtain rises. And there seems to be a fair amount of empty space as well, since Tagalao is able to move about. In the Hebrew story, God, at least, is on stage when the play begins. If the alternative translation mentioned in the note is correct, a "heaven" and a formless, empty, watery "earth" are also present. It is clear, therefore, that if all religious creation stories are like these, none of these stories addresses the question why there should be anything at all. This does not mean that no religion has ever had anything to say about why there is something rather than nothing, for it may be that some religion has had something to say about this question that is unrelated to or goes beyond the creation story it tells. And in a sense—but only in a sense—this is the case. It is the case because many religions have co-existed with philosophical speculation and have absorbed some of the ways of thinking generated by philosophical speculation.

In Christian Europe, for example, there was an intimate relation between philosophy and the Christian religion, a relation that persisted in one form or another from soon after the beginnings of Christianity till the eighteenth century. And many of the Christian philosophers belonging to one strand or another of this tradition were aware of the question 'Why should there be anything at all?' and attempted to answer this question from a Christian perspective. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that these philosophers gave answers to this question that incorporated many Christian elements, even if they were never simply dictated by Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the investigations of these philosophers were philosophical investigations and stemmed at least in large part from philosophical motives: the discussion of the question may have belonged to Christian philosophy, but it certainly belonged to Christian *philosophy* and not to any other aspect of the Christian religion.

The same point could be made in relation to Jewish and Muslim philosophy. The philosophical traditions on which Christian, Jewish, and Muslim philosophy have drawn are Greek in origin and antedate Christianity and Islam. And if these roots do not antedate Judaism, they certainly antedate any Jewish concern with speculative philosophical questions. It would be a task far beyond the scope of this book to examine all these roots. I will instead discuss two metaphysical arguments that are products of the appropriation by the three Middle Eastern or "Abrahamic" religions of the tradition of philosophical reflection that began in Greece. These two arguments are of central importance in any investigation of the question, 'Why is there a World?' Their central importance in the investigation of this question is due to the fact that they turn on the concept of a "necessary being." As we shall see, any answer to the question, 'Why is there a World?' must somehow involve this notion.

### Notes

1. From a Samoan creation story. Quoted in Robert Shapiro, *Origins: A Skeptic's Guide to the Creation of Life on Earth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), p. 36.
2. Genesis 1:1-4. According to some scholars, the opening words of this passage could also be translated as follows: 'When God was first beginning to create the heaven and the earth, the earth was without form and void.'
3. See, for example, G. W. Leibniz's treatise (published in 1714; there are many editions and translations) *Principles of Nature and Grace*, particularly §7.

# 6 NECESSARY BEING: THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Late in the eleventh century, a theologian named Anselm (later the archbishop of Canterbury) wrote a book called the *Proslogion*, which was largely devoted to the exposition of a certain argument for the existence of God. The interesting thing about this argument was that it claimed to prove the impossibility of the non-existence of God, owing to the fact that any assertion of the non-existence of God must be self-contradictory. This is a very strong claim indeed. To see how strong it is, imagine an atheist named Athelred who is fond of proclaiming to all and sundry that there is no God. If Anselm is right, then every time Athelred issues this proclamation, he contradicts himself; he contradicts himself in just as strong a sense as he would have if he had said, "There is no God . . . and there is a God" or "My house is rectangular and has six sides." Anselm did not, of course, contend that the contradiction involved in saying there was no God was quite as blatant as the contradictions involved in these two statements. If the contradiction were that easy to spot, no argument would be needed to display it. But he did contend that this contradiction was a contradiction in the same strong sense as the contradictions involved in these two statements.

It should be obvious that if Anselm is right in his claims for his argument, then this argument provides an answer for the question, 'Why should there be anything at all?' For if the thesis that there is no God is self-contradictory, it cannot be true. And if there were nothing at all, that thesis would be true. If Anselm's argument shows that there has to be a God, then, it shows that there cannot be nothing. Granted, it does not show that there has to be a physical universe like the one we observe around us, and thus it does not answer the question why there should be such a universe. But the question, 'Why should there be anything at all?' is not the same question as, 'Why should there be a physical universe?' The conclusion of Saint Anselm's argument, moreover, is not irrelevant to the latter question, since, if there is a God, this God no doubt has a great deal to do with the fact that there is a physical universe.

Anselm's argument was almost immediately attacked by one Gaunilo, a Benedictine monk, and theologians and philosophers have been attacking it ever since. About

two hundred years after Anselm's time, in the late thirteenth century, the argument was declared invalid by Saint Thomas Aquinas, and almost everyone has followed his lead in declaring it invalid. Indeed, philosophers and theologians have not only mostly regarded the argument as invalid but have also mostly regarded it as obviously, scandalously, and embarrassingly invalid. This judgment was nicely summed up by the nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who called the argument a "charming joke."

And what is this notorious argument? Actually, rather than examine Anselm's argument, we shall render our task considerably easier if we look at an argument devised about five hundred years later—at roughly the time the Pilgrims were landing at Plymouth Rock—by René Descartes. Descartes's argument (which is much easier to state and to follow than Anselm's) and Anselm's argument are generally classified as different "versions" of the same argument: each is customarily described as a version of "the ontological argument."<sup>1</sup>

Descartes's argument goes something like this:

If we look within ourselves, we find that we possess the concept of a supremely perfect being. [Descartes identifies the concept of a supremely perfect being—from now on we shall say simply 'perfect being'—with the concept of God and therefore regards his argument as a proof of the existence of God. But since the existence of God is not our primary concern—our primary concern is the question why there is anything at all—let us ignore this aspect of Descartes's argument. We shall simply avoid the word 'God' and the question whether the concept of a perfect being is the same as the concept we customarily associate with this word.] That is, we find the concept of a being that is perfect in every respect or, as we may say, possesses all perfections. But existence itself is a perfection, since a thing is better if it exists than if it does not exist. But then a perfect being has to exist; it simply wouldn't be perfect if it didn't. Existence is a part of the concept of a perfect being; anyone who denied that a perfect being had the property existence would be like someone who denied that a triangle had the property three-sidedness. Just as three-sidedness is a part of the concept of a triangle—the mind cannot conceive of triangularity without also conceiving of three-sidedness—existence is a part of the concept of a perfect being: the mind cannot conceive of perfection without also conceiving of existence.

This argument of Descartes's, if it is correct, provides us with an answer to the question, Why is there anything at all? If Descartes is right, it is impossible for there to be no perfect being, just as it is impossible for there to be a triangle that does not have three sides. And if it is impossible for there to be no perfect being, it is impossible for there to be nothing at all, since the existence of a perfect being is the existence of something.

The faults that have been ascribed to the ontological argument are many and various. One might, for example, raise the question why existence should be regarded as a "perfection." What's so wonderful about existence? one might wonder. After all, many people seem to think that they can improve their lot by suicide—that is, by electing non-existence. But it is generally conceded, or was until rather recently, that one of the faults of the ontological argument is so grievous that it is the only one the critic of the argument need mention. This fault, or alleged fault, is best known in the formula-

tion of Immanuel Kant. Kant's diagnosis of the argument's chief fault can be stated follows:

Whatever else a perfection may be, any perfection must be a property—or feature, attribute, or characteristic—of things. But existence is not a property of things. 'Existence' is not one item in the list of the properties of (for example) the Taj Mahal, an item that occurs in addition to such items as 'white', 'famous for its beauty', 'located in the city of Agra', and so on. Rather, when we specify certain properties and say that something having those properties exists, all we are saying is that something has those properties. Suppose, for example, that the following are the properties everyone agrees the poet Homer had if he existed: he was a blind, male Ionian poet of the eighth century B.C. who wrote all or most of the epic poems we know as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Call this set of properties H. Now suppose there are two classical scholars, one of whom thinks Homer existed and the other of whom thinks Homer was legendary (the two great epics that are supposedly his compositions having been pieced together over a long period from the work of many anonymous poets). It would be wrong—in fact, it would be absurd—to describe the disagreement of these two scholars by saying that one thought that someone had the set of properties H and, in addition, the property "existence," while the other agreed that someone had the set of properties H and went on to assert that this person lacked the property "existence." No, it's just that one scholar thinks that someone had all (or at least most of) the properties in the set H and that the other thinks that no one has ever had all of (or even very many of) them. This case illustrates the sense in which existence is not a property.<sup>2</sup> But if existence is not a property, it cannot be an ingredient of a concept. A concept is really no more than a list of properties, the properties a thing must have to fall under that concept. For example, the concept of a dog is just the list of properties a thing must have to count as a dog. (The list of properties enumerated a few sentences back spells out the concept associated with the description 'the poet Homer'.) What Descartes has done is to treat existence as if it were the kind of thing that could be an ingredient of a concept. If one does this, however, one opens the door to all sorts of evident absurdities. Here is an example of such an absurdity. Define an 'egmount' as an existent mountain made entirely of gold: to be an egmount, a thing must (a) be a mountain, (b) be made entirely of gold, and (c) exist. It is obviously a part of the concept of an egmount that an egmount exists: it says so on the label, as it were. But, as everyone knows, there are no egmounts. The ontological argument is this same absurdity in a (thinly) disguised form.

Although this refutation of the ontological argument was "standard" for almost two hundred years, it cannot be regarded as satisfactory.<sup>3</sup> The problem is not so much that Kant says anything that is definitely wrong. The difficulty is rather as follows. It is possible to construct an argument very similar to Descartes's argument—an argument that just obviously ought to be invalid for the same reason as Descartes's argument—that does not treat existence as a property. And it is possible to point to a rather obvious defect that is shared by the two arguments. It will be obvious when we have done this that the shared defect is what is really or fundamentally wrong with Descartes's argument and that the Kantian refutation of the argument is at best a point about a peripheral fault in the argument.

Let us consider the idea of *necessary existence*. A thing has necessary existence if it would have existed no matter what, if it would have existed under any possible circumstances. An equivalent definition is this: A thing has necessary existence if its non-existence would have been impossible. And by 'impossible' we mean *absolutely* impossible: if  $x$  is a necessary being, then the non-existence of  $x$  is as impossible as a round square or a liquid wine bottle. (I hope no one is going to be tiresome and tell me that ordinary room-temperature glass is a liquid.) It is obvious that you and I do not possess necessary existence: we should never have existed if our respective sets of parents happened never to have met, and that is certainly a "possible circumstance." Moreover, it is clear that the same point applies to Julius Caesar and the Taj Mahal. As to the latter, it would not have existed if the beloved wife of a certain Mogul emperor had not died young. And even an object that has, by everyday standards, a really impressive grip on existence—Mount Everest, say—lacks necessary existence: Mount Everest would not have existed if the Indian subcontinent had not drifted into contact with Asia. The very sun would not have existed if certain random density distributions in the pre-stellar nebulae had not led to the gravitational contraction of a particular grouping of hydrogen atoms into a radiating body. For all we know, even the physical universe might not have existed—either because whatever it was that caused the universe to come into existence ten or fifteen thousand million years ago failed to produce any universe at all or because this cause produced some other universe.

These reflections make it clear that necessary existence is a property, in just the sense that mere existence is not (if Kant is right) a property. It is true that it may not be a *possible* property. Perhaps it is a property like *being both round and square* or *being a liquid wine bottle* or *being a prime number larger than all other prime numbers*, a property nothing could possibly have. (It is certainly hard to think of an uncontroversial example of a necessarily existent thing.) The important point for present purposes is that necessary existence cannot be said not to be a property at all—not, at any rate, because of considerations of the sort Kant adduces to show that existence is not a property. It seems clear that whatever may be the case with mere existence, necessary existence *can* be an ingredient in a concept. In fact, many philosophers and theologians have held that necessary existence is a part of the concept of God—and other philosophers and theologians have denied that necessary existence is a part of the concept of God. Now let us consider an argument that is like Descartes's ontological argument, except that 'necessary existence' is substituted for 'existence' throughout. The argument would look something like this:

- A perfect being has all perfections.
- Necessary existence is a perfection.  
*Hence*, A perfect being has necessary existence.
- Whatever has necessary existence has existence.  
*Hence*, A perfect being has existence.
- Whatever has existence exists.  
*Hence*, A perfect being exists.

It is interesting to note that in one way, at least, this argument is more plausible than Descartes's actual argument. We saw above that it is not quite clear why one should as-

sume that existence is a perfection. But there seems to be no such problem about necessary existence. A being (like you and me and Caesar and the Taj Mahal and the sun and perhaps even the physical universe) that lacks necessary existence will typically depend for its own existence on the prior operations of other beings, and probably these operations will involve a large element of sheer *chance*. But a necessarily existent being is not dependent on the vagaries of chance, for its existence is absolutely inevitable. To exist necessarily is, therefore, a most impressive accomplishment—the same can hardly be said for existence: the lowliest worm and the most ephemeral subnuclear resonance manage to *exist*—and any necessarily existent thing is a most impressive being. Many philosophers and theologians have, for this very reason, wanted to include necessary existence among the attributes of God. It therefore seems very plausible to hold that necessary existence should be an item in any list of "perfections."

Be that as it may, the new version of Descartes's argument is obviously invalid, and it looks very much as if it were invalid for much the same reason as the original version. Recall the example of the negmount. We can easily construct a similar example that is addressed to the revised argument. Let us define a "negmount" as a *necessarily* existent golden mountain. If the revised version of the argument is valid, then (or so it would seem) so is the following argument. Let us call the three properties that occur in this definition (necessary existence, being made of gold, and being a mountain) the "negmontanic properties." We may now argue:

- A negmount has all negmontanic properties.
- Necessary existence is a negmontanic property.  
*Hence*, A negmount has necessary existence.
- Whatever has necessary existence has existence.  
*Hence*, A negmount has existence.
- Whatever has existence exists.  
*Hence*, A negmount exists.

But the conclusion of this argument is obviously false. There is no negmount. In fact, it can plausibly be argued that not only is the conclusion false but it couldn't *possibly* be true. A mountain, whatever it may be made of, is a physical object, and it is very hard to see how a physical object could possibly be necessarily existent. Even if necessary existence is possible for some sorts of things, a physical object is composed of parts, and it would not have existed if those parts had never come together. But there is no need to argue about this subtle point. The same conclusion can be reached in a way that allows no evasion. Let a "nonsquare" be a necessarily existent round square. If the above argument is valid, an exactly parallel argument proves the existence of a necessarily existent round square—and hence of a round square.

It is clear, therefore, that the above argument is *not* valid. But where is its logical defect to be found? Not where Kant says the defect in Descartes's argument is to be found, for the argument does not assume that existence can figure as an ingredient of a concept, and Kant has provided no reason to think that necessary existence cannot figure as an ingredient of a concept. (The concept of a negmount seems to me to be a perfectly good example of a concept, albeit it is not a very useful concept.) What is wrong with the negmount argument is very simple: its first premise—A negmount

has all negmontanic properties'—is ambiguous. That is, it could have either of two meanings:

- Anything that is a negmount has all the negmontanic properties.
- There is a negmount that has all the negmontanic properties.

(The former of these statements is true whether or not there are negmounts. It simply says that a thing does not count as a negmount unless it has all the negmontanic properties. The latter statement, of course, cannot be true unless there is a negmount.) The ambiguity is rooted in two quite different functions performed by the indefinite article. To say "A public official is sworn to uphold the law" is to say that anyone who is a public official is sworn to uphold the law, an assertion that could, in principle, be true even if there were no public officials. To say "A public official was arraigned in Superior Court today" is to say that there is a public official who was arraigned in Superior Court today. (Descartes's original statement of his argument was in Latin, which has no word corresponding to 'a' and 'an'. But there is a corresponding ambiguity in the Latin constructions he used.)

Because the first premise of the negmount argument is ambiguous, "it" is not really one argument at all, but two arguments jumbled together. When we disentangle the jumble, we find that one of these arguments begins with the premise that anything that is a negmount has all the negmontanic properties, and proceeds to the conclusion that anything that is a negmount exists; the other begins with the premise that there is a negmount having all the negmontanic properties, and proceeds to the conclusion that there is a negmount that exists. Neither of these two arguments should convince anyone that there is a negmount.

As to the first argument, its premise is clearly true, but its conclusion—anything that is a negmount exists—is true whether or not any negmounts exist (just as 'Anything that is a unicorn has a single horn' is true whether or not there are any unicorns). As to the second argument, its conclusion obviously implies that there is a negmount (an existent negmount, if that adds anything to the assertion that there is a negmount), but this was asserted by the premise—there is a negmount that has all the negmontanic properties—and it is no news that one can derive the conclusion that there is a negmount from the premise that there is a negmount. Such plausibility as the original negmount argument had derived from the fact that, because the two arguments were run together, it looked as if we had an argument with the impressive conclusion of the second argument and the innocent premise of the first.

All these points apply, with very minor adjustments, both to Descartes's ontological argument and to the revised version of his argument (the one that appeals to the notion of necessary existence rather than to simple existence). Let us consider the revised version. When the first premise of the argument is properly disambiguated, we have two arguments:

- Anything that is a perfect being has all perfections.
- Necessary existence is a perfection.  
Hence, Anything that is a perfect being has necessary existence.
- Whatever has necessary existence has existence.

- Whatever has existence exists.  
Hence, Anything that is a perfect being exists.
- There is a perfect being that has all perfections.  
Necessary existence is a perfection.  
Hence, There is a perfect being that has necessary existence.
- Whatever has necessary existence has existence.  
Hence, There is a perfect being that has existence.
- Whatever has existence exists.  
Hence, There is a perfect being that exists.

The first of these two arguments proceeds from an obvious premise to a trivial conclusion. The second argument has a non-trivial conclusion, but this conclusion is, essentially, its first premise. Those who grant the first premise of the second argument hardly need the other premises; they can make do with a much simpler argument:

- There is a perfect being that has all perfections.  
Hence, There is a perfect being.

But this argument has—to say the least—little persuasive force.

It should be clear that the ambiguity we have found in the revised version of Descartes's argument is present in the original. Such persuasive force as the original argument has is due simply to its being a jumble of two arguments; one of the two has an obviously true premise and the other has an interesting conclusion.

Descartes's attempt to prove the impossibility of the non-existence of a perfect being is a therefore failure and so can be of no help to us in our inquiry into why there should be anything at all. (Without going into the details of the matter, I will record my conviction that the earlier argument of Saint Anselm is also a failure.) This does not mean, however, that the ontological argument is of no relevance to our inquiry, for it may be that there are other versions of the ontological argument, versions not guilty of the fallacy of ambiguity that was the downfall of Descartes's argument. And recent researches in the philosophy of modality (the philosophy of necessity and possibility) do indeed seem to have produced a "new" ontological argument, an argument that does not exploit a hidden ambiguity or commit any other logical fallacy.

This argument, which is usually called the modal ontological argument, is best presented in terms of "possible worlds." This notion may be explained as follows. We have said the "the World" is the totality of everything there is. But it is obvious that the World might be different—indeed that it might always have been different—from the way it is. There might be fewer cats or more dogs. There might never have been any cats or dogs at all (if, say, evolution had taken a slightly different course). Napoleon might have lost the battle of Austerlitz or won the battle of Waterloo. As we saw in our discussion of the notion of a necessary being, the sun—perhaps even the physical universe—might never have existed. A list of the ways things might have been different (which is the same as a list of the ways the World might have been different) could go on and on without any discernible limit. By a possible world, we mean simply a complete specification of a way the World might have been, a specification so precise and definite that it could be distinguished from any other possible world.