

## METAPHYSICS AS THE STUDY OF NON-RESTRICTIVE EXISTENTIAL STATEMENTS

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**ABSTRACT:** In this short article I will initiate a defense of the Hartshornian claim that metaphysics is the study of non-restrictive existential statements. It is generally agreed that ordinary factual statements are at least *partially restrictive* of existential possibilities. That is, if they are affirmative, they at least implicitly deny something; further, if they are negative, they at least implicitly affirm something. For example, if I say that the corkscrew is in the drawer, I am denying that the drawer is filled with things other than corkscrews. Or if I say that there is no corkscrew in the drawer, I am affirming that everything in the drawer is something other than a corkscrew.

The above statements are partially restrictive, in contrast to those that are either *completely restrictive* or *completely non-restrictive*. A completely restrictive statement is one that denies that any existential possibility is realized. An example would be saying that “absolutely nothing exists.” A completely non-restrictive statement is exemplified in the claim that “something exists.” This latter claim is the contradictory of the wholly restrictive statement that “absolutely nothing exists.” I will argue that the claim that “absolutely nothing exists” expresses an impossibility rather than a conceivable but unrealized fact (as in the possibility that there could be a corkscrew in the drawer even if there is no corkscrew there at present). A contradictory of an impossible statement is necessarily true, hence it will be no surprise to learn that I will also argue that the statement that “something exists” is necessarily true.

**KEYWORDS:** Metaphysics; Charles Hartshorne; Non-restrictive existential statements

The humility of the metaphysician (on this account of metaphysics) is in evidence when it is realized that the vast majority of knowledge claims, as found in either common sense or science, involve partially restrictive statements that are contingent. In addition, metaphysics also differs from mathematics, which admittedly also studies non-restrictive statements, but those that are (with qualification) non-existential. That is, metaphysics on the view I will defend is a

very narrow discipline in contrast to the expansiveness of common sense, science, and mathematics.

Critics might object that, by viewing metaphysics as the study of non-restrictive existential statements, hubris has indeed been avoided, but the significance of metaphysics has been reduced to the vanishing point. My reply involves at least two points. First, escaping from the still pervasive Humean view that all existential statements are contingent is no small accomplishment if only partially restrictive existential statements are contingent. That is, some existential statements (e.g., “something exists”) are necessary and some are impossible (e.g., “square-circles exist”). Second, the real excitement in metaphysics starts with the effort to show that there are other interesting results in the search for non-restrictive existential statements that are necessarily true.

I will gesture toward what some of these results might be on the assumption that “something exists” embraces within its meaning all of the metaphysical truths, albeit not in any immediately obvious way. To the bare assertion that “something exists” we can add “experience occurs” and “divine experience occurs.” In each case, denial of any of these necessarily true claims involves a contradiction.

The view to be defended can be called “neoclassical metaphysics.” It is “classical” in the sense that the old phrase “being qua being” is still relevant in that metaphysics does not study this or that particular fact, but the strictly universal features of existential possibility, those that cannot be unexemplified. But it is also “neo” in the sense that it is cast in terms of an event ontology, in contrast to the traditional substance-based view.

To use different language from Karl Popper in defense of the neoclassical stance, knowledge is of two kinds: empirical and a priori. Empirical truths are those that some conceivable experience could *falsify*. Although they cannot be *verified* by experience, they can be *supported or corroborated* by actual experience. Truths in mathematics, logic, and metaphysics, however, are not of this sort. These disciplines deal with non-empirical and non-contingent truth. That is, there is no empirical metaphysics on the controversial view I am defending or on the use of the term “metaphysics” as I am defining it. The reason is that metaphysical truths are not vulnerable to observational tests in that they claim to harmonize not simply with actual but with conceivable experience. Metaphysical

truths *can* be tested, but by imaginative or intellectual experimentation rather than by perception or physical experimentation.

In metaphysics, as I am conceiving it, there can be falsity, but falsity is shown either by contradiction or by a lack of any coherent meaning. This means that it makes more sense to refer to truth by coherence in metaphysics than it does to refer to truth by coherence in science. Observations of the actual world alone cannot establish metaphysical principles, even if such observations are the lifeblood of empirical disciplines. Both metaphysics and empirical disciplines deal with reality, hence there is something a bit presumptuous in the mission statement of the Metaphysical Society of America that “the purpose of the MSA is the study of reality.” A better way of speaking would be to say that empirical disciplines also study reality, but not reality as such or the necessary features of the real. They study *particular* realities in their very contingency.

On the view I am defending, metaphysics studies the necessary character of all existence. This position is part of an effort to offer a philosophical alternative to classical metaphysics, on the one hand, and contemporary efforts (largely derived from David Hume and Immanuel Kant and others) to discredit metaphysics, on the other. The latter are usually offered without any awareness of the neoclassical alternative.

A putative thought whose content is completely negative is, as I see things, problematic. This is due to the fact that a putative thought whose content is self-contradictory is not rationally defensible. One may utter the words “a colorless blue thing” or “the existence of absolutely nothing,” but there is something contradictory and hence rationally problematic (due to a lack of content) in each case. The propositional content of a metaphysical statement (e.g., “something exists”), however, is such that its *denial* is self-contradictory. Further, if one denies (à la Hume or Kant) that *any* understanding of existence can be necessarily true, then one is, in effect, suggesting that “absolutely nothing exists” is possibly true, and hence opening oneself to the charges of both semantic and pragmatic self-contradiction. To say that “absolutely nothing exists” is to imply what one also precludes.

Franklin Gamwell goes so far as to claim that “no decision in philosophical thought is more fundamental than whether or not ‘something exists’ is necessarily true” (*Existence and the Good* 29). There is nothing hyperbolic in Gamwell’s claim

if it has the remarkable consequence of destabilizing the distinction (held as dogma by many philosophers) between *de dictu* and *de re* necessity and the claim that only the former is defensible. That is, this widely defended distinction relies at least implicitly on the possibility that “absolutely nothing exists” is true. The sheer absence of what is ontologically necessary is assumed by those thinkers to be logically possible. It is precisely this assumption and thus the distinction in question that I view as illicit.

Of course, one might claim that “something exists” is necessary and then conclude that little, if anything, follows from this claim. But seeing “something exists” as necessarily true is to provide a template for other metaphysical truths, hence Gamwell’s aforementioned (only apparent) hyperbole. Metaphysical necessity refers to those conditions or characteristics of existence that cannot fail to obtain or that cannot fail to be exemplified. Their denials are not possibly true. Metaphysical claims are nonetheless criticizable if one or more of the concepts found in the claim are vague or incoherent. They are also criticizable if there are implications of metaphysical claims that are not yet formulated that may in the future prove to be incoherent. Seen in this light, metaphysics is an attempt to formulate more and more defensible schemes than those proposed in the past regarding unrestrictive claims about existence. As before, metaphysical claims are not only criticizable, but they can also be corroborated (if not verified) by showing that efforts to demonstrate that their denial could be true have thus far proved to be unsuccessful.

Some scholars restrict their attempts to generalize about possibilities and actualities to contingent or empirical features of reality. I have no quarrel with these thinkers so long as the excellent work that they do in science or even cosmology (which they might refer to as a sort of “empirical metaphysics”) is not meant to restrict study of the truly metaphysical characteristics of *all* items of experience, both possible and actual. The term “generic” can indeed mean “most general” in the sense of empirical generalization, but the term can also refer to the necessarily true features of the real.

Not only is it obviously true that something exists, it is true a priori. No possible experience could show that nothing at all existed because the experience itself would exist. “Something exists” is a necessary, metaphysical truth and to claim that “there might have been absolutely nothing” is to have language idling,

to put the point in Wittgensteinian terms.

It is common to view the sort of argument I am offering as “transcendental.” In addition to the medieval transcendentals (being, one, true, good, and beautiful) there is, I am claiming, a disjunctive transcendental: necessary or contingent. Anything real can be said to be either necessary or contingent and it would be a mistake to think that only the latter characterizes the real. Transcendental metaphysics is actually a type of logic, in contrast to that operative in a contingently true or false statement. Or at least such a view can be called transcendental if we replace “being” with “becoming” as characterizing the basic character of reality. A statement such as “something that is  $x$  exists” is necessarily true when it is a feature or condition of the possible as such. In this regard it should be noted that all contingent meanings imply the metaphysical ones, as when we say that “kangaroos exist” implies that “something exists.” Statements about existential necessities designate features of the real exemplified in both the infinite past and future, in contrast to a contingent feature of the real that is necessarily finite. It is finite by virtue of what it excludes.

The significance of transcendental metaphysics is evidenced in its bold (in Popper’s sense of “boldness”) rejection of what Gamwell sees as *the* most widely accepted assumption in contemporary philosophy: that all existential statements can be denied without self-contradiction. Thus, on the basis of this assumption, every true existential statement *has to be* true contingently (see *On Metaphysical Necessity* 13 regarding this glaring example of pragmatic self-contradiction). The claim that all existential statements can be denied without self-contradiction, or that all existential statements are logically contingent, at the very least reflects a *dominant* consensus in contemporary philosophy, if Gamwell’s once again quite defensible view that it is *the* most widely accepted assumption is seen as hyperbolic.

In addition to being explicit about the transcendental character of metaphysics, I should be clear about the sorts of self-contradiction to which I am calling attention. The self-contradiction referred to here is *semantic* and thus designates a self-contradiction that occurs within the *meaning* of a statement, as in the aforementioned reference to a colorless object that is blue. This is in contrast to a self-contradiction that is *syntactic* and that occurs in the *structure* of a statement’s signs independent of meaning, as in “ $x$  is  $p$  and *not- $p$* .” Both of these

are to be distinguished from *pragmatic* self-contradiction or self-refutation where what one says is at odds with the requirements of our *activity in the world*. On the consensus view, by contrast, “absolutely nothing exists” is possibly true and hence this view is liable to the charges of semantic and pragmatic self-contradiction. “Absolutely nothing exists” is a pragmatic self-contradiction because any subject who asserts it simultaneously is giving evidence of its own existence.

I am a modal egalitarian who finds a role for all three of the following: some (even most) existence claims are indeed contingent, but some are impossible and some are necessary. For example, “absolutely nothing exists,” I argue, is impossible and “something exists” is necessary. It is a difficult question whether Kant deserves additional criticism here in that, on the one hand, he seems to say that noumenal presence can *only* be designated by negation, but on the other he seems to say that this presence *is*. It is not often noticed that one pays a price for modal parsimony. Something *completely* negative cannot be distinguished from the supposed absence of all things.

It might be objected that “absolutely nothing exists” might be true because, were *all* things absent, there would be no subjects like us and hence no pragmatic self-refutation. But this objection itself, it should be noted, implies that something that understands exists in the very articulation of the argument. A subject does, in fact, exist in order to assert “absolutely nothing exists.” To define metaphysics as the explication of what must be the case if “absolutely nothing exists” is impossible, is to assert that to designate only by negation is not really to designate. A possibly true statement “something that is *x* exists” can be consistently denied only if the negation implies some other positive statement. Our awareness of absence depends on our awareness of presence, as Plato realized long ago in the *Sophist* (241d) when he committed parricide on “Father Parmenides” by showing the necessity of *relative* non-being or otherness (*me on*), but who nonetheless denied even the possibility of *absolute* non-being (*ouk on*). As before, metaphysics so defined is transcendental and explicates the semantic logic of existence, which requires “meontic” negativity, but not the “oukontic” sort.

The unintelligibility of the oukontic is amplified by the realization that any logical system with genuine logical applicability presupposes non-emptiness in its universe of discourse. For example, Alfred North Whitehead’s and Bertrand Russell’s *Principia Mathematica* assumes such non-emptiness because without this

assumption certain basic logical principles break down. That is, non-emptiness is a requirement of logical coherence in the sense that such coherence needs at least a minimal ontology that can stand as a value for the logical variables themselves. The fact that we can engage in *any* semiotic activity (including logic) involves interpretation and/or revision, which in turn presuppose there is *something* to interpret and/or revise. In this regard, “something exists” is not so much a thesis among other happenstance theses as it is a precondition for the very having of theses, as George Shields has argued.

I would now like to address the aforementioned concern that the conception of metaphysics I am defending leads to very slim results if all that I can show is that “something exists.” But there are several other defensible metaphysical claims, one of which is that “God exists.” I will examine this claim via a modal version of the ontological argument, not with the hope that I will actually convince anyone who is not already convinced of the soundness of the argument (even if hope *does* spring eternal), but rather to further illustrate the cogency of metaphysics when seen as the discipline that deals with non-restrictive claims regarding existence and that helps us to clarify the relations among three modal concepts: necessity, contingency, and impossibility. Consider the following version of the argument:

1. Modality of existence is a predicate (in that saying that  $x$  exists necessarily or contingently or impossibly, rather than merely saying that  $x$  exists, is surely to predicate something significant about  $x$ ).
2. There are three (and only three) modes of existence: (a) impossible (cannot exist); (b) contingent (may or may not exist); and (c) necessary (must exist).
3. 2b contradicts the logic of perfection (which is St. Anselm’s great discovery in chapter 3 of *Proslogion*) because a being that existed only contingently in some circumstances, but not others, would not be the greatest conceivable.
4. Therefore, the existence of God—the greatest conceivable being or a perfect being—is either impossible or necessary (preliminary conclusion).
5. The existence of God is not impossible (which is the conclusion from other theistic arguments and from mystical experience).

6. Therefore, the existence of God is necessary; or, at the very least, the nonexistence of God is inconceivable (ultimate conclusion).

One of the most common mistakes that occurs when interpreting the ontological argument is to assume that what must be inseparable from the concept of God is not only the bare *existence* of God (*that* God exists), but also God's full *actuality* (*how* God exists from moment to moment). In ordinary cases of existence, not only is the particular concrete actuality contingent, but also it is contingent whether there is any existence embodying the predicate. On the basis of the ontological argument, however, God's existence is necessary or inevitably actualized, although the particularities of God's actualization at any particular time are contingent and open to human (and other) influence. In different terms, in our case existence and actuality are contingent, whereas in the divine case only actuality is contingent in that God's necessary existence means that divine existence is always somehow actualized, the details being contingent. Nothing concretely actual can be necessary.

Of the three forms of modality, it is *contingency* that characterizes human experience of, or knowledge of, God. This is because such experience or knowing is, in our case, neither *necessary* nor *impossible*. Or better, the point to the ontological argument is that, although it is impossible to conceive the non-existence of God, it *is* possible to conceive of the possible existence of God. Further, mystics claim to *experience* God, which is not surprising given the conclusion of the ontological argument to the effect that *if* God's existence is conceived, it has to be conceived as existent. Although having a *concept* of God and having *experience* of God are quite different things, the two are compatible. In neoclassical theism, a defense of the ontological argument makes it possible to understand the complementary roles of the conceptual and the experiential.

The idea that the divine existence is entirely extra-conceptual and must be experienced, rather than conceived, is extreme, as is the opposite view that the divine actuality can be deduced via logical argumentation. Of course, some thinkers claim that one cannot have a concept of God without religious experience. If this claim were true, then we would all (theists, atheists, and agnostics) have to be mystics before we could discourse about the concept of God! This seems hyperbolic. In a different sense, however, an appreciation of the concept of God itself *is* an experience, say when one achieves the Anselmian



realization that God's existence could not be contingent. Indeed, all thought about God is close to the ontological argument in that, if we really are thinking about God we could not be thinking about merely an additional empirical fact about the world.

To grasp what the concept of God is one needs no special historical reference or special perceptual experience, only the intelligence to be able to understand the most universal aspects of any kind of experience. God is a datum for human thinking *and* feeling, with the former highlighted in the ontological argument, while the latter is the stuff of mystical experience. One of the advantages of Anselm's way of thinking is that it can liberate us from traditional ways of thinking about God. "Greatness" refers to whatever properties it would be better to have than not to have and it is by no means clear that thinkers in previous ages have avoided mistakes regarding what properties the greatest being would have.

It is often objected to the ontological argument that we normally do not analyze our thoughts to find out what exists. But questions regarding existence are at least sometimes conceptual. For example, we can know by conceptual analysis that a round-square cannot exist, that Abraham Lincoln could not vote to impeach Donald Trump, etc. The objector is, however, correct that the effort to find out what exists contingently cannot be determined merely conceptually. Anything definitely conceivable is either contingent or necessary, and, if necessary, necessary positively or negatively (impossible). If contingency of existence is shown (a la Anselm) not to apply in the case of a perfect being, then the key question is whether the positively necessary existence is conceivable. It must be admitted, however, that disproving atheism does not itself establish the conceivability or logical possibility of God.

A monolithic version of empiricism popular today would discredit theistic metaphysics. The thesis of this part of my article is that the intellectual approach to God found in the ontological argument and mystical experience mutually reinforce each other. These are two ways in which God can be "verified" by finite (or better, fragmentary) human beings. It has long been noted that the different rational arguments for the existence of God mutually support each other in that where one is weak, the other is strong. But I am trying to accomplish something a bit different by urging the mutual reinforcement intellect and experience can give to each other, a neoclassical version of something attempted

(only partially successfully) in the medieval synthesis on a classical theistic basis. Metaphysics and contingent experience can complement each other even if they are conceptually distinct.

Of course, it might be objected that if we really did have a coherent insight into the nature of perfection, which is what the ontological argument requires, then we would have no need of the argument in that we would know that God exists as a result of the mystical experience that made the insight possible. This objection is tempting, but it should be emphasized that the conceivability of God that the ontological argument requires is a logical conceivability that avoids the contradictions found in classical theism. The argument does *not* require that we have an intuition into divine actuality such as that allegedly experienced by various mystics. That is, there is no need to beg the question in favor of the ontological argument by *requiring* the sort of experience mystics claim to have.

One advantage in thinking of the ontological argument and mystical experience together is that we can be free of the familiar misconception that this argument moves illegitimately from the abstract to the concrete. Nothing could be further from the truth. The necessary existence of God that is the result of the argument is itself very abstract. The argument tells us about the abstract divine existence (which is either necessary or impossible), but not about concrete actuality, which must be either felt in mystical experience or, in Wittgensteinian fashion, shown but not said. The divine existence discussed in the ontological argument is unspeakably less than God as actual. The more concrete can never follow from the evidence in the less concrete. Concrete actuality is always more than bare existence. *That* the divine nature exists is one thing, *how* this nature is concretely actualized is another. Granted, classical theists who defend the ontological argument conflate the move from God's perfection to God's necessary existence with the move from abstract existence to concrete actuality, but there is no good reason for such conflation, from a neoclassical point of view.

The doctrine of *haecceity* from the middle ages (especially in Duns Scotus) points toward an important truth about concrete actuality: its idiosyncratic, unique, very particular quality, in contrast to abstract truths discussed in mathematics and physics and metaphysics. God is abstractly perfect *and* perfect in concrete details, which are experienced by mystics. The great achievement of the ontological argument is the conclusion that we cannot conceive perfection as

non-existent, but this conclusion does not tell us *how* a perfect being reacts at any particular moment to the current actual occasions in their own concreteness.

The point to the modal version of the ontological argument is not that existing is better than not existing, hence the unsurpassable being must exist. It is rather that a being who cannot be conceived not to exist is better than one who can be conceived not to exist. Of course, this argument assumes that we *can* develop a concept of God that is possible, in contrast to the classical theistic view wherein there are contradictions at every turn. Do we really know what we mean when we talk about “God”? The debate between classical theism and neoclassical theism is an attempt to clarify such meaning so that we can also understand what it would mean to *experience* such a being. Or again, although the ontological argument deals with the *concept* of God as a formal, necessary, metaphysical truth, the concept of God used by classical theists is quite different from that used by neoclassical theists in the effort to accommodate both divine concrete actuality and human experience of such.

To suppose that belief in God’s existence is empirical is to suppose that, while some actual observations might be compatible with the existence of God, there might also be conceivable observations that might not be and as a result would falsify divine existence. The most likely location for these latter observations is in the theodicy problem, hence the importance of the critique of the concept of omnipotence in the development of the process or neoclassical concept of God. That is, some concepts of God *are* problematic, either because they involve contradiction or they lack coherent meaning, on the one hand, or they are insufficiently metaphysical because they are allied with the contingent truths/falsities of empirical reality, on the other.

There can be no possibility of the non-existence of God *unless* the very concept of God is contradictory or incoherent. On the view of metaphysics I am presenting, the existence of God is a matter of concepts and not of observational facts. It must nonetheless be admitted that there is *some* empirical component in religious belief (if not in metaphysics) if the experiences of the mystics are to be trusted. But the argument from religious experience is not “metaphysics,” as I am using the term. Mystical experience, if there is such, informs us more about divine *actuality* (or *how* God interacts with creatures) than about how to argue philosophically, indeed how to argue metaphysically, regarding the very *existence*

of God. For those of us who are not mystics, God must be identified conceptually.

Although God's *existence* is either necessary or impossible, God's *actuality* (or *how* God exists from moment to moment) must be characterized by contingency *if* God knows and loves contingent creatures. By partial contrast with two famous metaphysicians, Aristotle thought that God was necessary in every respect, hence he denied that God could know or care for contingent creatures; Spinoza also thought that God was strictly necessary, but Spinoza's God could nonetheless know the creatures because these latter were themselves strictly necessary. All three of these positions, however, are dealing with the same metaphysical problem of trying to articulate the proper relationship between necessity and contingency in the divine case. And all three (Aristotelian theism, Spinozistic theism, and neoclassical theism) are in opposition to the classical theistic belief in many thinkers in the Abrahamic religions that God is strictly necessary and immutable yet is mysteriously (in the pejorative sense of "mystery") able to know and love contingent and constantly changing creatures.

The ontological argument can clearly be formulated in a valid form where the conclusion follows logically from the premises, but its soundness depends on our having a consistent and coherent concept of God. *If* we can develop such a concept, then the argument implies that the necessity of God be actualized somehow, the details of which are contingent (just as "something exists" is necessary, the details of which are contingent—and herein lies the link between the two halves of the present article). The difficulty of this task of developing a coherent concept of God is highlighted by the fact that historically there have been many concepts of God proposed that are either lacking clarity or are notoriously inconsistent. That is, our coming to know the metaphysical claim that God exists necessarily is itself highly contingent.

The neoclassical concept of God, a concept that involves dual transcendence of necessary existence as well as preeminent responses to creaturely contingencies, is, in one sense, based on the insights of several classical authors, but in another sense it is a radical revision of classical theism. Hence it is both "classical" and "neo." Hartshorne's striking way to put the point is to say that "if theism cannot be improved upon *profoundly*, then I for one have little desire to see it survive" ("Ethics and the New Theology," 92).

The point I am trying to emphasize here is that the decisive metaphysical

question regarding the ontological argument is whether the concept of God is genuinely conceivable. The nature of the question is non-empirical. In fact, an empirical premise is not only not needed, it would be an inappropriate category mistake to add one. To put the point in terms of the philosophically popular terms of possible worlds, the concept of God is metaphysical in the sense that God either exists in all possible worlds or in none of them. By putting the point in this manner, we are led counterintuitively to consider the *rhetorical* component even in an abstract discipline like metaphysics as I conceive it. That is, the burden of proof is on the opponent to the argument to indicate not merely reasons in opposition to the argument, but to show why the concept of God is *impossible* like a square-circle. This burden is heavier than many suppose.

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