



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Existence exists, and it is God

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Abstract

Much of historic Christian philosophical theology has affirmed that God not only exists, but is Existence itself. Nowadays, this claim is widely rejected as unintelligible by theists and non-theists alike. I argue in contrast that if there is such a thing as Existence itself, that thing must be a maximally excellent being, which is what many philosophers call God. This is because Existence would itself need to exist, which is only possible if Existence exists in a *paradigmatic* way, that is, as a perfect instance of existence. My argument thus offers both a defence of the coherence of the claim that God is Existence itself, and a new way of arguing for theism.

Keywords: Existence; natural theology; ontology; classical theism; Thomism

Introduction

‘[The] supreme Being makes everything to be that is, which is why he is also called Being’ (St Augustine, *De vera religione*).¹

One of the more puzzling contentions of historic Christian philosophical theology is surely the claim that God is not a mere ‘being among beings’, but rather ‘Being itself’, or ‘Existence itself’. Though typically associated with Thomism, the above quote from Augustine shows that this way of conceiving of God has much deeper roots. One could also cite Boethius, who identified God with ‘Being itself’, that which every being participates in, but which ‘itself participates in no way in anything’ (Klima et al. 2007, 318), and Anselm, whose *Monologion* refers to God as ‘supreme existence’, through whom everything else exists (Davies and Evans 1998, 18), to name just two. Its influence loomed large in twentieth-century theologians like Paul Tillich and his followers, and continues to hold sway over modern adherents of classical theism (e.g. Feser 2021, 6).

Nevertheless, and despite its venerable pedigree, the identification of God with Existence itself is widely dismissed as unintelligible or at best exceedingly mysterious by analytic philosophers of religion, both theistic and secular. Anthony Kenny’s comment that ‘even the most sympathetic treatment’ of the doctrine at hand ‘cannot wholly succeed in acquitting them of the charge of sophistry and illusion’ (1980, 60)² probably represents the majority opinion in the field. To maintain that God is both an existing being *and* Existence itself, which all existing things somehow ‘have’ or ‘partake of’ smacks of conceptual confusion, like saying that the number 2 is red. There is also the worry that God as

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Existence itself would be radically unknowable and/or incomprehensible, and thus fundamentally incompatible with the personal, relatable God of the religious believer.

Despite these critiques, detailed defences of the theory exist in the literature (Miller 1996, 2012; Vallicella 2002). I wish to add to them, by developing an argument for the existence of what I will call a ‘supremely excellent being’, which is also Existence itself. I begin with the assumption that there is such a thing as ‘Existence’, that in virtue of which every existing thing exists. I then show that this fact gives rise to a number of serious problems, which can only be solved if we take it that Existence is in fact a supremely excellent being. I conclude that such a being exists, before responding to objections.

My argument is as follows:

- (1) Existence exists.
- (2) If Existence exists, it must be a Supremely Excellent Being.
- (3) Therefore, Existence is a Supremely Excellent Being.

The success of my argument would show that if there is such a thing as Existence itself, that thing must be a supremely excellent being, which is what many philosophers call God. My argument would thus offer both a defence of the coherence of the claim that God is Existence itself, and a new way of arguing for theism.

Motivating (1): ‘Existence exists’

What is the nature of existence? Let us first distinguish between *general* and *singular* existence. The former pertains to the existence of a kind or class of things, e.g. ‘dogs exist’, while the latter denotes the existence of particular things, e.g. ‘Snoopy exists’.

That there is such a thing as singular existence seems obvious enough, at least to the non-philosopher. Strangely, some philosophers have forcefully argued that there is, in fact, no such thing, and that it makes no sense to say that any particular thing exists. The rejection of singular existence is often traced back to Kant’s well-known criticism of the ontological argument for theism. In response to the claim that existence is part of the essence of a perfect being, Kant comments that ‘exists’ is not a predicate of things, since it adds nothing to the concept or definition of an object.³ The function of predicates is to tell us *what* a thing is, whereas ‘exists’ tells us *that* a certain kind of thing exists. Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell subsequently went on to argue that sentences seemingly referring to singular existence are either meaningless, or disguised references to general existence. For example, ‘Snoopy’ may be taken to be a *definite description*, such as ‘Charlie Brown’s dog’, in which case ‘Snoopy exists’ means ‘There is at least one thing that has the property of being Charlie Brown’s dog’. Since this sentence states that some property is exemplified in the world, rather than claiming that any particular thing exists, it refers to general rather than individual existence (for a helpful discussion of the Frege-Russell view, see van Inwagen 2014, 61).

There are well-known issues with this supposedly ‘orthodox’ position, not least that it struggles to account for existential statements involving demonstratives and pronouns, e.g. ‘*This* dog exists’ and ‘*I* exist’. Such statements seem eminently meaningful, and yet the denial of singular existentials would appear to entail that they aren’t.⁴ In any event, the main argument of this article will assume that this position is false, and that there are singular existentials.⁵ Thus, the statement ‘I exist’ attributes existence to *me*, just as other, similar statements attribute existence to particular things.

Granting all this, what exactly is it that is attributed to all existing things? J. P. Moreland (2001, 136) helpfully lists the most common candidates: to say that a particular thing ‘exists’ is to say that it is located in space and time, or that it is physical, or capable of entering into

causal relationships, that it is perceived or itself a perceiver (as Berkeley and his disciples would have us believe), or that it instantiates some other special sort of property. Moreland's own view is that for something to exist is for it to be part of the 'exemplification nexus', that is, for there to be some property such that it is exemplified by that thing (*ibid.*, 137–138). Another is Reinhardt Grossmann's account of existence as the 'substratum of the world', similar to Aristotelian prime matter (Grossmann 1992, 112–115).

In each of these cases, all particular things exist in virtue of having or *sharing*⁶ in something, which may be a property which they instantiate, or spacetime, or whatever else. That thing, whatever its exact nature, is *Existence*.

Existence, then, is what makes it the case that particular things exist – indeed, it isn't even logically possible for particular things to exist without sharing in Existence. This suggests the following simple argument in defence of my argument's first premise, which is itself adapted from Moreland's argument for the same conclusion (*ibid.*, 135):

- (i) Existence enables particular things to exist.
- (ii) Existence could not enable particular things to exist, unless it itself exists.
- (iii) Therefore, Existence exists.

Moreland argues that it makes a real difference to the world whether particular things exist, and thus that one needs to exist in order to have what it takes to bring about this state of affairs. Similarly, Grossmann contends that '[if] existence did not exist, then nothing would exist' (1983, 405).

'Enabling to exist' is a relation that Existence bears to particular existing things. But it is impossible for anything to stand in any relation to something else, unless that thing exists. Hence (ii) is true, and motivates (1) in conjunction with (i).

Motivating (2): 'If Existence exists, it must be a Supreme Being'

A problem: incoherence

The claim that Existence itself exists immediately strikes one as suspect. It indeed seems like an obvious category mistake – more precisely, as a failure to distinguish properly between Being *as such*, and *a* being, or in Aquinas' terms, *esse* and *id quod est* (Stump 2016, 198).

Why might such a distinction be important? The whole point of postulating something like Existence is to offer a kind of explanation of existence-facts. Just as properties like 'Redness' are meant to explain how it is that numerically distinct things can all be 'red', 'existence' (whether or not it is a property) serves to explain how such things can all 'exist' or 'have being'. But if Existence itself exists, then existence-facts are 'explained' in terms of an existence-fact, namely, the fact that Existence exists. That is, they are not being explained at all, since this amounts to answering the question 'Why are there existence-facts at all?' with 'Because of *this* existence-fact' (compare: 'lions exist because they are all descendants of *this* one lion). Put differently, the thing that was supposed to explain why there are beings at all turns out to be a being as well. The attempt at explanation thus fails due to being viciously circular, because the explanation itself contains that which is supposedly being explained.

In response, one could point out that on the view at hand, for something to 'exist' is for it to 'share' in Existence (whatever the 'sharing' relation turns out to be, cf. endnote 6). Hence, Existence can likewise exist simply by sharing in itself – for instance, if it is a universal, it can exist by exemplifying itself. In that case, there is no explanatory failure, because *all* existence facts, including the fact that Existence exists, are explained.

But this seemingly neat solution has a deeply problematic implication. If Existence itself exists by somehow sharing in itself, then it follows that Existence owes the fact that it exists to *itself*. But the thought that something could derive its existence from itself, thereby *being* or contributing to the explanation of its own existence, is unintelligible. In order for something to bestow existence on something else, it must already exist, prior to the bestowing. Hence, to say that something, be it Existence or anything else, derives the fact that it exists from itself puts the metaphysical cart before the horse: something does not exist *because* it is able to bestow existence on anything, rather, it is able to do so *because* it exists.

We may put the point in a slightly different way. If Existence already exists, prior to making things exist, then there is no need for it to make itself exist, since it already exists. If it does *not* already exist, then it cannot make itself exist, since it would need to exist in order to do so.

It is instructive to see how a particular account of Existence fares with respect to the above problem. Suppose, then, that what Colin McGinn (2000, 16) calls the ‘naïve view’ of existence is true, and that Existence is a property of particulars. Suppose also that realism about properties is true. In that case, Existence is a *universal*, something capable of being exemplified by numerically distinct particulars. To exist, on this view, is simply to exemplify the universal ‘Existence’, and the fact that Existence itself exists is explained by the fact that Existence bears the exemplification relation to itself.

Hence, the universal ‘Existence’ is somehow capable of existing, simply by exemplifying itself. Now, if such a universal existed, it would be correct to say that it *gives* existence to the things that exemplify it, insofar as it *makes* it the case that they exist. In other words, existing things *receive* their existence from the universal ‘Existence’.⁷ But in that case, to say that Existence exists by exemplifying itself is to say that it gives existence to itself. But it would not be able to ‘give’ anything, to itself or to anything else, without existing first. And if it existed first, it would not need to give itself its existence.

At the very least, we would be owed a convincing explanation as to how Existence, unlike every other existing thing, should be able to pull itself up by its own bootstraps, so to speak. As far as I can see, no such explanation is available, because the idea of a literally self-explanatory entity is incoherent.

A dilemma

We appear to have reached an ontological impasse. We have just seen strong reasons to deny the claim that Existence exists. But as we saw earlier, there are seemingly equally strong reasons to reject the claim that Existence does not exist. We may express our predicament in the form of a dilemma:

- (A) *Either Existence does not exist.* If so, it is incapable of enabling anything to exist, in which case nothing at all exists. This is very unattractive.
- (B) *Or, Existence exists.* If so, it is somehow capable of bestowing existence upon itself, unlike every other existing thing. This is incoherent, and thus also very unattractive.

Since there are no logical possibilities other than (A) and (B) (by law of excluded middle), we find ourselves forced to choose between two options, each with unsavoury implications. Thankfully, it so happens that (B) need not have the implications in question, as long as it is understood that Existence is the *paradigm existent*, as I will now argue.

A solution: Existence exists in a different way

The above dilemma may give rise to the impression that we must choose between the following two options: either Existence is an *ordinary* existent, existing in the same way as all other existing things (be they particulars or universals, or whatever else); or Existence does not exist at all.

A promising route would be to accept (B), but to qualify it by denying that ‘exists’ means quite the same thing when applied to ordinary beings on one hand (such as the Taj Mahal, the Milky Way and my pet hamster), and Existence on the other. Perhaps existence comes in two modes,⁸ which we may call mode 1 and mode 2. William Vallicella (2002, 7) proposes the following ‘schema’ of existence:

Necessarily, x exists (in mode 1) if and only if there is a y (which exists in mode 2) such that y stands in R to x .

The relation ‘ R ’ here is what we have called the ‘sharing’ relation, which stands between ordinary existents and Existence. Mode 1 is the ordinary way of existing, exhibited by ordinary beings. Mode 2 is the way in which Existence exists, which Vallicella calls the *paradigmatic* way (*ibid.*, 2). To exist in this second, special way, there is no need to ‘share’ in anything.⁹ Rather, the existence of a *paradigm existent* consists in its self-identity.

We may precisify the above account as follows:

Paradigm Theory (PT): x exists if and only if either x is identical to the paradigm existent, namely Existence, or x bears the ‘sharing’ relation to Existence.

I shall have much more to say about what it means to be a ‘paradigm existent’. For now, notice that this explanatory account is unaffected by the worries expressed above. First, there is no circularity in the explanation of ordinary existence-facts (involving ‘mode 1’ existence), since these are explained in terms of a different kind of existence-fact (involving ‘mode 2’ existence). Second, the explanation of special existence-fact is not incoherent. The fact that Existence exists is grounded in the trivial (and perfectly coherent) fact that Existence is identical to itself. That is to say, Existence does not ‘have’ or ‘receive’ its existence, it *is* its existence. Though there may perhaps be a sense in which Existence is ‘self-explanatory’, the self-identity of Existence does not in any way require it to make itself exist (which *would* be incoherent), any more than the self-identity of anything else.

Therefore, distinguishing different modes of existing allows us to circumvent the serious problems that face the claim that Existence exists. However, the relevant notion of a ‘paradigm existent’ raises its own set of issues, which we must now address.

Existence is the paradigm existent

On the face of it, the above way of salvaging the claim that Existence exists seems like an obvious case of special pleading. We began with the position that to exist is to share in Existence, which must itself exist, since it enables other things to exist. It then transpired that this analysis could not be applied to the fact that Existence exists, on pain of incoherence. We effectively responded with the claim that this fact constitutes a genuine special case, grounded in the self-identity of its subject, rather than in acquiring existence from itself. But unless there are good reasons to believe that there *can* be an exception to the rule that to exist is to share in Existence, this is simply *ad hoc*. Indeed, when faced with an apparent counter-example to a candidate analysis of some philosophically interesting phenomenon, one cannot merely assert that this is the one exception to the

theory, and thus that the theory still stands. Rather, one must explain why the general rule postulated by the theory can admit of special exceptions.

Moreover, it is surprising that one existing thing should be able to exist simply by being self-identical, while all other things, while equally (trivially) self-identical, do not thereby exist, and must instead depend on some further thing for their existence. Without an explanation for this striking asymmetry, one wonders why other, or even all, existents shouldn't likewise exist through their self-identity, in which case there would be no need to postulate Existence in the first place.

So, how might the ontological privilege of Existence be explained? The earlier-evoked notion of a *paradigm* gives us a clue. A paradigm *F* is an *F par excellence*, such that it sets the standard for being an *F*. Take for instance the way that van Gogh's original *The Starry Night* painting relates to the many copies that have been made of it.¹⁰ There are two ways in which the predicate 'is a *The Starry Night* painting' can be correctly applied to something: it must either simply *be* van Gogh's original, or an *imitation* of the original, that is, it must have van Gogh's original as what medieval scholastics would have called its 'exemplar cause'. That the original painting, unlike every other painting, can be a *The Starry Night* just by being self-identical does not at all constitute an arbitrary, *ad hoc* exception. On the contrary, it is a *bona fide* special case, which should be perfectly intelligible to everyone who understands the concept of a paradigm.

Now, suppose that Existence was a being *par excellence*, such that all ordinary existents exist in virtue of the fact that they are *imitations* of Existence. Here as well, it would not at all be arbitrary or surprising that Existence should exist simply in virtue of being self-identical. To put it another way, there would be nothing *ad hoc* about admitting two 'modes' of existence, one ordinary and the other special, just as there are two modes of being 'The Starry Night'.

Hence, identifying Existence with the paradigm existent, in the sense just outlined, explains why its existence can consist in its self-identity, unlike for all other existents. Let us now explore the implications of this account for the nature of Existence.

Existence is the Supremely Excellent Being

What sort of entity would a paradigm existent be? To say that it would be a *typical* example of an existing thing is clearly a non-starter. Anthony Kenny (2002, 92) refers to existence as 'the attribute which is common to mice and men, dust and angels'. He might as well have added even more esoteric sorts of entities like numbers, times, universals, possible worlds, propositions, and so forth. Faced with this dizzying diversity, one can only conclude that there is no such thing as 'typical existence'.

This should not bother us, because the relevant notion of a 'paradigm' does not at all entail statistical commonality – if all copies of the original *The Starry Night* were poorly painted, the original itself would not be a typical example of a *The Starry Night* painting, but this would not stop it from being a 'paradigm' in our sense.

Rather, to be a paradigm *F* is to be a *perfectly good* or *true*¹¹ instance of *F*. Indeed, the existence of a paradigm *F* implies that there are better and lesser ways of being *F*, and that one is a good or true *F* to the extent that one conforms to a certain standard of *F-ness*, which just is the paradigm *F*. Obviously, no particular *F* could be better or more truly *F* than the paradigm *F*, since if it did, then it would be the paradigm. For example, it is impossible for any painting to be a better or truer *The Starry Night* painting than van Gogh's original.¹²

Thus, a paradigm existent would be a *perfect* instance of existence, implying that there are better and lesser ways of existing.¹³ This accords with our intuition that while both humans and oysters are real, the existence of the former is superior to that of the latter, in virtue of some of the attributes that humans have and that oysters lack, such as self-

awareness, creativity, the ability to form relationships, etc. Such attributes, which may rightly be called *excellences*, are attributes that make their bearers praiseworthy.¹⁴ The implication seems to be that something exists *well* to the extent that it exists *excellently*, that is, that it possesses excellences.

But if the paradigm existent is a perfect instance of existence, and thus exists in a perfect way, then it follows that Existence must possess all the excellence that it is possible for a being to possess. This must surely include consciousness, intelligence, rationality, and indeed maximal power, knowledge and moral goodness, to name only some. Whatever the exact nature of such a being, it is surely appropriate to call it a *supremely excellent being* – hence (2).

Comparison with Vallicella's account

Before attending to objections, let us briefly compare the above analysis of existence to William Vallicella's, with whom it shares the idea of Existence as a 'paradigm existent', whose existence consists in its self-identity. For Vallicella, what makes Existence distinctive is that it acts as the 'unifier of [the] ontological constituents' of ordinary existents (*ibid.*, 2). These constituents include 'thin particulars', which are the universals they exemplify (*ibid.*, 182). The unifier combines these into concrete *thick* particulars, thereby generating ordinary existents. To be an ordinary existent, then, is to be created in this way by Existence, which in turn exists by being self-identical.

Leaving aside the question of whether we should adopt a constituent ontology,¹⁵ this does not yet tell us how the unifier can be said to exist 'paradigmatically'. In effect, simply being the explanation of why there are X-facts does not thereby make one a paradigm X – for example, if mereological simples explain why there are composites (and thus, facts about wholes), it certainly does not follow that simples are paradigmatic composites (since they are not composites at all, let alone paradigmatic ones).

Helpfully, Vallicella tells us that the paradigm existent 'exists in a standard-setting way', while ordinary existents are 'existentially substandard'. The asymmetry lies solely in the fact that the paradigm is 'self-existent', while every other existent 'exists derivatively', depending on something else for its existence (*ibid.*, 33). This brings us back to the idea of there being better and lesser ways of existing, and of the paradigm being existing in the best possible way.

That self-existence is more admirable, and thus greater or more 'excellent' in our sense, than its opposite has our intuitive assent. What is significantly less intuitive is the assumption that ontological independence is all that there is to existing well or excellently. To recall my earlier example, the existence of human beings is just as derivative as the existence of oysters. And yet, it is difficult to deny that human beings nevertheless exist in a higher, more excellent way than oysters. This suggests that there is more to 'standard-setting' existence than being self-existent, as admirable as that is. An understanding of the paradigm existent as a supremely excellent being, possessing all the excellences that jointly constitute perfect existence, which may well include but is not exhausted by self-existence, accounts for this. More generally, it just seems arbitrary to limit paradigmatic existence to the possession of a single excellence, while ignoring all the others.

I conclude that my proposed account of paradigmatic existence is more plausible than Vallicella's. It should also be mentioned that Vallicella's reasons for believing in a paradigm being are different from mine. His main argument for postulating such a being is that it terminates a vicious regress, of a Bradleyan sort. Having postulated the paradigm, he presents it as the best candidate for being the referent of the word 'existence', though not because it would rescue the claim that 'Existence exists' from the charge of incoherence, as in my argument. In short, Vallicella argues that since the paradigm being exists,

we can identify it with Existence (*ibid.*, 7). In contrast, I argue that since a paradigm being is the only thing that could be identified with Existence, there must be a paradigm being.

Summary and transition

I began with the (reasonable) assumption that existence is attributable to individuals, and thus that there is something, Existence, which all ordinary existing things ‘share’ in some sense. Existence, I argued, must itself exist in order to make any difference to reality. But this gave rise to the problem that Existence would apparently need to somehow bestow existence upon itself in order to exist, which is incoherent and therefore false. This problem was solved by distinguishing two modes of existence, one paradigmatic and the other ordinary. Existence was taken to exist in the former mode, being a perfect standard of being whose existence consists in its self-identity, which it trivially has. Ordinary existents, on the other hand, exist by imitating the paradigm existent, thereby revealing the mysterious ‘sharing’ relation to be imitation. I then argued that Existence, in order to be the paradigm existent, should be a supremely excellent being, possessing all the excellence that it is possible for a being to possess. Hence my argument’s second premise: ‘If Existence exists, it must be a Supremely Excellent Being’.

The implications of this argument for natural theology are in need of unpacking. I shall wait until the concluding section of this article before undertaking this. But first, and having motivated my argument’s two premises, let us consider some objections to each of them.

Objections to (I) ‘Existence exists’

Existence and subsistence

Having just argued for realism about universals, Bertrand Russell famously denied that these ‘exist’, like the particulars that exemplify them. Rather, they *subsist*, where ‘subsistence’ is timeless and thus absolutely immutable, while to ‘exist’ is to be in time and thus subject to change (Russell 1912, 57). This distinction is of course not original to Russell, but rather traces back to the work of Alexius Meinong (1960/1904), in which it played the crucial role of explaining how non-existent entities like Pegasus could nevertheless be ‘real’ in some sense.

Recall my argument for the claim that Existence exists:

- (i) Existence enables particular things to exist.
- (ii) Existence could not enable particular things to exist, unless it itself exists.
- (iii) Therefore, Existence exists.

I motivated (ii) by arguing that ‘enabling particular things to exist’ is a relation, and only existing things can stand in relation to other things. One could object that this begs the question against the view that Existence is a universal, which (it would be argued) is precisely the kind of thing that can bear relations to other things without exists, since mere ‘subsistence’ is sufficient for them to be able to bear the instantiation relation to particulars.

This first objection is easily dispatched. Supposing that existing and subsisting are really distinct conditions, they are two distinct modes of a further, more basic condition, namely that of *being real*. Russellian universals may not share existence with the particulars that exemplify them, but they certainly share ‘reality’ with them – any metaphysical theory that denied this of universals could surely not call itself ‘realist’!

Suppose my main argument was reformulated, such that all references to ‘existence’ were replaced by ‘reality’, rendering:

- (1') Reality is real.
- (2') If Reality is real, it is a Supremely Excellent Being.
- (3') Therefore, Reality is a Supremely Excellent Being.

Where 'Reality' is that in virtue of which all real things, whether existents or subsistents, are real. If I was successful in motivating (1) and (2) of my original argument, I do not see why (1') and (2') could not likewise be motivated by the same considerations. (1') would be buttressed by an argument to the effect that Reality could not enable other things to be 'real' unless it was itself real. And the incoherence of Reality bestowing reality upon itself, just as it gives reality to ordinary real things, would pressure us towards the view that Reality is the 'Paradigm Real', whose reality consists in self-identity, and which is the best possible instance of a real thing, hence (2').

Ultimately, what Russell (and others who recognize the exist/subsist distinction) call 'reality' is what I have called 'existence'. The issue, as I understand it, is merely terminological – let us therefore turn to more substantial ones.

Nihilism about properties

Once again, a key assumption of (1) is that existence is attributable to individuals. As we have seen, one way of making sense of this is to say that existence is a *property* exemplified by existents. I argued that on this view, as in all other views that attribute existence to individuals, all existing things exist in virtue of 'sharing' one unique thing, namely Existence. This then enabled me to show that this shared thing must *exist*, in order to be that in virtue of which everything exists, hence (1).

This, one could object, surreptitiously takes a side in the age-old controversy over the nature of properties. As is well known, the two camps in the debate are realism and nominalism, where the former postulates universals (e.g. redness) which can be shared by more than one particular, while the latter denies it. If nominalism were true, the instantiation of existence by particulars would not at all require them to share in some universal, or anything at all, thereby undercutting the justification for (1).

In truth, the objection greatly oversimplifies nominalism, which is a family of theories rather than a single theory. The relevant terminology may give the impression that realists accept that properties are 'real', while nominalists deny this. But to be a 'realist' in this sense is to be a realist about *universals*, that is, to accept a certain theory about the nature of properties. Conversely, nominalists need not, and most often do not, deny that properties exist. Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, himself a nominalist, notes that '[nominalism] has nothing against properties . . . as such', but rather opposes their identification with 'universals or abstract objects' (2002). Similarly, John Carroll and Ned Markosian distinguish between austere nominalists on one hand, who 'deny that there are any properties', and set and trope nominalists, who 'acknowledge properties but maintain that they are not universals', but sets of particulars (e.g. 'redness' is the set of all red things) or rather tropes, namely particularized properties (e.g. the redness of *this* rose), respectively (Carroll and Markosian 2010, 234).¹⁶ Concept nominalists, who identify properties with mental concepts (e.g. to be red is to fall under the concept 'redness'), also seem committed to the existence of properties, insofar as concepts are themselves real entities, though this is less often acknowledged.

Therefore, most nominalists would agree that if existence is a property of individuals, all existing things would exist in virtue of sharing in some X, whether X is the concept of existence, a set of all existing particulars, or whatever else.¹⁷ They too, then, must accept that X, which I have called 'Existence', exists.

But what about those 'austere' nominalists, who may affirm that existence (like redness, humanity etc.) is attributable to individuals, but deny individuals exist in virtue

of sharing anything in common? When asked, ‘in virtue of what do different things exist?’, they respond ‘nothing, they just *do*’. Their stubborn refusal to offer any metaphysical explanation of facts like ‘The tomato is red’ and ‘The Milky Way exists’ has earned them the title of ‘Ostrich nominalists’ (Devitt 1980).

An examination of this rather extreme position lies well outside the scope of this article. I must therefore leave it to the side, and humbly admit that its adherents are unlikely to be moved by my defence of (1).

Objections to (2) ‘If Existence exists, it must be a Supremely Excellent Being’

Triviality

My motivation for (2) included the contention that Existence exists *in virtue* of being self-identical – that is, the self-identity of Existence is the metaphysical ground or explanation of the fact that Existence exists. It may be thought that ‘Existence is Existence’ is too trivial a claim to be the explanation of anything. In effect, explanatory relations are irreflexive and non-trivial, while identity is reflexive and trivial. So, one might argue, the self-identity of Existence cannot explain how it is that Existence exists.

But trivial facts, including facts about identity, can still play explanatory roles. For instance, the fact that A & B are qualitatively indistinguishable can be explained by the fact that A = B. That explanation and identity are distinct relations does not preclude the latter from figuring in an explanation. For instance, while the claim that van Gogh’s original painting just is that painting, it is perfectly reasonable to say that it is a *The Starry Night* painting in virtue of being itself, given its role as the paradigm *The Starry Night* painting.

More to the point, recall that on my account, to exist is *either* to be identical to the paradigm existent, *or* to be an imitation of it. Thus, ‘exists’ is a disjunctive predicate, such that ‘Existence exists’ = ‘P V Q’, where P = ‘Existence is the paradigm existent’, and Q = ‘Existence imitates the paradigm existent’. P states an identity claim. Even so, the truth of P is clearly a suitable metaphysical ground or explanation for P V Q, insofar as the truth of a disjunction is grounded in the truth of at least one of its disjuncts.

Existence does not come in degrees

The idea of a supreme ‘standard’ of existence, which played a crucial role in my motivation of (2), may be thought to imply that there are different degrees of existence, just as there are different degrees of kindness, beauty, redness, and so on, and that one exists *more* to the extent that one resembles the standard.

The thought that existence is something that one might have more or less of is one of the hallmarks of Neo-Thomistic thought, whose representatives often speak of ‘degrees of being’ (Maritain 1948, 51). Critics charge that it is simply confused. As Christopher Hughes puts it, ‘there does not seem to be a difference between being perfectly existent and being less than perfectly existent’. This is because existence, unlike kindness and beauty, is an ‘on/off property: either you’re there or you’re not’ (Hughes 1989, 27). Hughes concludes that the Thomistic position is unintelligible.

But a distinction between paradigmatic and ordinary existence does not entail different degrees of existence, but rather different degrees of *good* existence. By way of analogy, take the (eminently plausible) claim that some human beings are better *as humans* than others, for example ‘Socrates is a better human being than Nero’. This is not to say that Nero is less human than Socrates. All humans are equally human, it is just that some of them are better at being human than others. There are no degrees of humanity, only degrees of *good* humanity. Likewise, to say that a human is better *as an existent* than

an oyster is not to imply that humans exist more than oysters, only that humans exist in a better (or truer) way than oysters do.

Therefore, the claim that existence does not come in degrees would be consistent with my claim that there is a paradigm being, and thus would not undermine my case for (2).

Some existents are not excellent

Let us now turn our attention to the ‘imitation’ relation, which is supposed to hold between ordinary existents and the paradigm existent, thereby grounding the existence of the former. For ordinary existents to exist, then, just *is* for them to imitate a supremely excellent being. An initial worry with this identification is that there might be existing things which could not imitate a supremely excellent being at all, since they have no excellence whatsoever. Recall, a ‘supremely excellent being’ was defined as a perfect instance of existence, which thus possesses as much excellence as it is possible for a being to possess, where an ‘excellence’ is an attribute that makes its bearers praiseworthy, such as rationality, wisdom, and power. But perhaps there are existing things, which we may call ‘totally mediocre’, since they are not worthy of any sort of praise or admiration.

For my part, I tend to think that all existing things, even the least impressive, deserve at least *some* praise, if only because they form part of the all-encompassing system of interconnected (causally or otherwise) existents which we may call ‘Reality’, or ‘the Actual World’, and which I consider to be objectively beautiful on the whole. To be part of something is to contribute to its existence, and to contribute to the existence of an objectively beautiful thing is, in and of itself, praiseworthy. So am I inclined to believe. Moreover, all putative examples of totally mediocre beings that come to mind turn out not to be so utterly devoid of excellence after all: numbers and universals are eternal, fundamental particles are mereologically ultimate, excrement is good fertilizer and hence conducive to life, etc. This is what we would expect if the medieval doctrine of the ‘convertibility of being and goodness’, which states that to *be* just is to be *good* to some degree, were true, and thus one of the considerations that nudges me in its direction.¹⁸

Fortunately, I shall not have to defend these musings, as existing in a totally mediocre way would not prevent one from imitating the paradigm existent. Luckily for the irredeemable mediocrities among us, one can imitate a supremely excellent being without being excellent at all, just as my attempt to imitate van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* would probably result in an absolutely terrible painting which would nevertheless be a genuine imitation. All that is needed is to be *self-identical*, which both the paradigm existents on one hand and all ordinary existents on the other trivially are.¹⁹ A totally mediocre thing would imitate the paradigm in this respect at least, and thus still count as an ‘existent’ on our analysis, despite its complete lack of excellence. It would exist, but not in any way that merits praise.

Existence is prior to imitation

A markedly more serious problem has to do with the claim that things exist *in virtue* of imitating something. It is often said existence is prior to the instantiation of properties, because nothing can have properties unless it exists *first*. J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig write that ‘regarding exemplification, the thing having the property (the apple) has to exist ontologically prior to exemplifying the property (being red)’ (2003, 216). The same intuitively applies to relations: in any instance of a relation, the *relata* must exist, prior to relating to one another. For instance, Jo and Joanna cannot love one another, unless they *first* exist. More relevantly for us, Jo is able to *imitate* Joanna’s behaviour, *because* they both

exist. But on our present theory of existence, it is the other way around: ordinary existents exist *because* they imitate something. It could therefore be objected that our account is incoherent, because imitation can never be prior to the existence of the imitator.

The objection compels us to be more precise about what ‘imitation’ really amounts to here. It is true that in many (and perhaps most) cases of imitation, both the subject and the object of the imitation (i.e. that which is imitated, and that which is doing the imitating) must exist prior to there being any imitating at all. This is especially clear in cases of what we might call ‘active’ imitation – cases in which the imitator is actively trying to resemble a model (as in the above example). But this is much less clear in cases of ‘passive’ imitation, where something passively ‘receives’ likeness to the model. For example, a copy of van Gogh’s original *The Starry Night* doesn’t actively try to do anything (after all, it is just an inanimate piece of canvas hanging on a wooden stand). It is simply *modelled* on an original by a painter. In this instance, there seems to be nothing incoherent in saying that the copy exists *in virtue* of being an imitation of the original. Indeed, its imitation of the original is its *raison d’être*, the reason it exists in the first place.

Now, suppose ordinary existents were likewise modelled after the paradigm existent, that is, intentionally *created* to resemble the paradigm to some degree. The above analogy may suggest the need for a ‘third party’ who, like the painter, produces the imitations based on his knowledge of the paradigm. The divine craftsman of Plato’s *Timaeus*, who strives to represent the eternal forms through creations made from recalcitrant matter, comes to mind. But the demiurge would himself be an ordinary existent on our account, and would thus need to create himself to resemble the paradigm existent, which is absurd. Thus, it is the paradigm itself that would need to do the creating, modelling ordinary existents after itself.

This, of course, is the role ascribed to God in classical theism. To give just two examples, Anselm’s *Monologion* likens the relationship between the Word (roughly, God considered as Eternal Intellect) and his creatures as that between a person and his portrait. To be a creature, he tells us, is to be an ‘imitation of the supreme essence’, and a ‘pale’ one at that (in Davies and Evans 1998, 46–47). Similarly, Leibniz writes in his *Discourse on Metaphysics* that ‘every substance bears in some way the character of God’s infinite wisdom and omnipotence and imitates him as much as it is capable’ (quoted in Duncan 2015, 17).

Once ‘imitation’ is taken to be a kind of creation, the objection at hand vanishes, because it is clear that the existence of a created thing is not ontologically prior to its being created. It would be strange indeed to argue that ordinary existents are created by the paradigm *because* they exist, and far more plausible to say that they exist in virtue of being created.

Pseudo-existence

One final objection to (2) holds that Existence does not *truly* exist on the account detailed earlier, in which it was argued that an existent can exist in either of two modes. To exist according to mode 1 is to be an imitation of Existence (in the sense clarified in the previous section). This may be referred to as the ‘ordinary’ way of existing, since it applies to all existents other than Existence, which instead exists in mode 2, that is, by being self-identical. Imitation and identity are different sorts of relation: the latter is trivial and necessarily symmetrical (if $a = b$, then $b = a$), while the former is non-trivial and need not be symmetrical. The critic may thus object that since Existence ‘exists’ in a different way (mode) than everything else, it is not accurate to say that Existence exists, as I have done throughout this article. Strictly speaking, Existence does not exist but rather exists*, where the asterisk signifies what I have called ‘mode 2’.

This result would be disappointing to those expecting an argument for the *existence* of a supremely excellent being (after all, it is the question of whether God *exists* that is of interest to natural theology, not the question of whether God exists*). More worryingly, the whole point of recognizing two distinct modes of existing was to explain how it could be the case that Existence exists (as stated by (1)), despite not enabling itself to exist. But if it turns out that the account laid out and motivated earlier entails that Existence does not exist, my motivation for (3) would contradict (1), revealing an internal incoherence in my main argument.

In reply, consider again van Gogh's original painting and its copies. As we have seen, the original is not a *The Starry Night* painting in the same way that the copies are (once again, self-identity and imitation are distinct relations). And yet, it would be absurd to infer from this that, strictly speaking, van Gogh's original is *not* a *The Starry Night* painting. If any painting qualifies as one, it is surely the original! It is precisely because it is one that its copies can likewise be *The Starry Night* paintings, though in a different way. Similarly, it is mistaken to argue that Existence does not strictly exist, because it does not exist in the same way as ordinary existents. The fact that Existence is the paradigm existent, namely a perfectly good (or true) instance of existence, setting the standard for being an existent, is what enables its imitations to exist, though in a different way.

The objection seems to presuppose that a predicate (or property, attribute etc.) P cannot genuinely be subdivided into two (or more) distinct modes or kinds. When it appears that one is, it must be that only one of the supposed 'modes' strictly corresponds to P. The other modes can only be said to loosely or non-literally correspond to P (strictly speaking, they correspond to P*, P' etc.). Perhaps this is motivated by the worry that if a predicate has more than one mode, it is an arbitrary or 'gerrymandered' predicate like Nelson Goodman's 'grue' (where something is grue if it is observed before *t* and green, or not observed before *t* and blue)²⁰ and therefore not a true or natural predicate. But the 'van Gogh' example shows that there need not be anything arbitrary about multiplying modes: the predicate 'is a *The Starry Night* painting' isn't arbitrarily tacked onto two sets of paintings that have nothing to do with each other. To the contrary, the predicate's subdivision into two modes reflects a real relationship between a paradigm and its imitations. Thus, the fact that 'exists' comes in two modes, such that anything that exists in either mode can be said to exist in the strict sense, would not imply that it is not a true predicate.

The objector might also worry that postulating two modes of existence precludes our ability to really understand existence. For modes 1 and 2 to both count as modes of *existing* despite being distinct from one another, they must at least have something in common. This 'something', one could argue, ought to be a further, more basic mode of existing which is shared by *all* existents, whether ordinary or paradigmatic. Call this 'mode 3'. By way of analogy, being a good writer and being a good footballer player are two distinct properties, but they are modes of some more basic property, i.e. 'being good at what you do' (or something like it), which *both* good writers and good footballers instantiate.

But what is this third mode of existing? The whole point of distinguishing modes 1 and 2 was to offer an intelligible account of existence. But we are now left with a mysterious 'mode 3', of which we have no account. Worse still, it transpires that modes 1 and 2 do not after all tell us what it means to exist *simpliciter*, but only what it means for certain kinds of existents to exist. To exist *simpliciter* is to exist in mode 3, and we do not know what that is. In other words, we are back where we started. If we tried to make sense of mode 3 by subdividing it into two further modes, which is how we began our analysis, we would obviously be trapped in an infinite regress.

In fact, mode 3 is unnecessary. Saying that van Gogh's original painting and one of its copies represent different ways of being a *The Starry Night* painting does not require us to postulate some third, more basic way of being a *The Starry Night* painting, which somehow

encompasses the other two. What the original and the copy have in common is the *imitation relation* that stands between them. Likewise, ordinary existents bear this relation to the paradigm, which exists in a standard-setting way. This paradigm–imitator nexus is sufficient to ensuring that both mode 1 and mode 2 are modes of *existing*, without the need to introduce a third mode.

Conclusion: towards a conceptual cosmological argument

I have presented and defended an argument for the existence of a supremely excellent being. Whether this amounts to an argument for *God's* existence depends on whether a supremely excellent being is indeed what God is. Not all are convinced of this – some argue that supreme excellence is logically impossible, or that defining God in this way is uninformative (e.g. Speaks 2018).

But if the naysayers are mistaken, and divinity really is supreme excellence, then the success of my argument would have the following welcome implications. First, we would have an intelligible explanation of the (admittedly baffling!) claim that God just is Existence, in which all existents share in some way, while also himself being a concrete existent: God exists in a paradigmatic way, such that to exist is either to be God, or to be created as an imitation of God. Thus, the initial charges of incoherence and incomprehensibility have been answered.

Second, we would have an answer to the vexing question, ‘why does God exist?’. In a recent paper, Chad McIntosh (2022) notes that contemporary theistic philosophers typically deal with this question rather dismissively, merely stating that God is ‘self-existent’ and therefore ‘self-explanatory’ in some sense, and thus that God’s existence is non-problematic. As he argues, it is difficult to provide an account of ‘self-explanation’ that is not obscure or contradictory (McIntosh surveys attempts at formulating this by Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, and finds none of them persuasive). But if my account of existence is correct, the identity of God with Existence itself, namely the paradigm existent, would constitute a metaphysical explanation of the fact that God exists. We have already seen how this works in the response to the ‘Triviality’ objection: ‘God exists’ = ‘Either God is identical to the paradigm existent, or God imitates the paradigm existent’. Given that the truth of disjunctions is grounded, and thus metaphysically explained, by the truth of their disjuncts, it follows that ‘God is identical to the paradigm existent’ explains ‘God exists’. The answer to the question ‘why does God exist?’ is therefore ‘because God is Existence itself, the paradigm existent’.

Third, we would have at our disposal a new version of a rare kind of cosmological argument, which I will call *conceptual*, as opposed to ‘standard’ cosmological arguments, which include both modal and temporal (or ‘kalam’) cosmological arguments. Both kinds seek to show that there exists an ultimate source or ground of existence (or at least of contingent existence), and then proceed to identify it with God. However, conceptual cosmological arguments are distinctive in that they reach their conclusion through a conceptual analysis of ‘existence’. Thus, while the standard arguments contend that God’s creative activity is the best explanation for the existence of the universe, or is deductively entailed by it when conjoined with some version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, the conceptual arguments contend that to be created by God just is what it means for an ordinary thing to exist.²¹

Again, such arguments are quite unusual (I have already mentioned William Vallicella’s, and compared it to mine). Yet it seems that they alone can do justice to the classical doctrine, often repeated in the work of Aquinas, that we have ‘being by participation’ in a ‘being that is its own being’ (*De Potentia* III.5., in 2012). We are not only

causally, but also *logically*, dependent on God for our existence, just as red things logically depend on their participation in the form ‘Redness’ for their redness.²²

It is my hope that the argument advanced in this article will draw more attention to this neglected aspect of historic theistic philosophy, and stimulate more interest in conceptual cosmological arguments.

Notes

1. In Ramsey (2012).
2. More examples of philosophical criticisms will be addressed in this article.
3. This Kantian objection seems to echo Aristotle’s statement in *Metaphysics* to the effect that “‘one man’ and ‘man’ are the same thing, so are ‘existent man’ and ‘man’” (quoted in Vilkko and Hintikka 2006).
4. There is also the worry that the theory of reference, to which the Frege-Russell view is committed, is widely rejected, largely due to the influence of Saul Kripke’s arguments in *Naming and Necessity* (1972). See McGinn (2000) for a host of other problems, and Katzav (2008) for responses to these problems.
5. Eliminativist positions, which deny that there is such a thing as existence, will also be left to the side. These include the position of Williams (1962, 129), who colourfully dismissed existence as ‘diaphanous, blank, neutral, and in sum, *nil*’.
6. Where this ‘having’ or ‘sharing’ relation is meant as a placeholder for whatever the exact relation between Existence and existing things will turn out to be. This will depend on the nature of Existence itself: for example, if it is a universal, ‘sharing’ will be the exemplification relation.
7. Compare: red things receive their redness (or, the fact that they are red) from the universal ‘redness’.
8. ‘Mode’ here should be taken in the sense of ‘way’ or ‘kind’, not as a particularized property or trope, as in the metaphysics of Lowe (2005).
9. This neutralizes the threat of an infinite regress: one might ask, ‘what is to stop us from saying “Necessarily, *x* exists (in mode 1) if and only if there is a *y* (which exists in mode 2) such that *y* stands in *R* to *x*, and *y* exists (in mode 2) if and only if there is a *z* (which exists in mode 3) such that *x* stands in *R** to *y*, *ad infinitum*”? But if mode 2 is *paradigmatic* existence, in a sense to be explained in the follow sections, one can exist in mode 2 without needing to bear a relation to some further entity.
10. This analogy was borrowed from De Ray (2021).
11. It may initially seem strange to ascribe ‘truth’ to a thing, rather than a proposition. This should be treated to denote a thing’s being a genuine or *bona fide* member of its kind, such as ‘true gold’, ‘true art’. This is closely related (or identical) to what Aquinas refers to as the *per se* truth of things (Wood 2013).
12. This does not mean that no copy could be more *beautiful* than the original, only that it could not be more ‘Starry-Night-like’.
13. This does not entail the controversial claim that existence comes in degrees, as I will argue in a later section.
14. Here I follow Robert Adams (1999, 14) who equates ‘excellence’ with ‘that which is worthy of love or admiration’. Importantly, the praise in question need not be *moral* praise, as one might still praise the intelligence and courage of a cruel murderer.
15. The alternative is a relational ontology. Roughly, constituent ontologies take properties to be constituents of their bearers, and thus ‘internal’ to them in a sense, whereas relational ontologies deny that properties are parts of particulars in any way (van Inwagen 2011).
16. See also Moreland’s (1990) distinction between ‘extreme’ nominalism, given which ‘there are no properties’, and standard nominalism, given which ‘properties exist and are themselves particulars’.
17. Even trope nominalism, which states that properties are particularized rather than literally shared, would hold that all existents exist in virtue of being existence-tropes, and that to be an existence-trope is to belong to a particular set of mutually resembling tropes. Thus here again, all existing things exist in virtue of sharing something, namely membership of a set.
18. See MacDonald (1991) for a collection of essays relating to the convertibility doctrine.
19. Vallicella (*ibid.*, 107) appears to argue that even non-existent things can be self-identical, because the self-identity of anything is necessary, while the existence of contingent things is contingent. If true, this would imply that even non-existent things could imitate the paradigm existent, in which case our analysis of ordinary existence is false. However, it seems far more plausible to say that non-existent things *would* be self-identical, *if* they existed.
20. See Goodman (1955).
21. As such, it would perhaps be accurate to call them *a priori* cosmological arguments.
22. My argument might also be seen as a reformulation of Aquinas’ Fourth Way, which infers the existence of ‘something which is truest, something best, something noblest and, consequently, something which is *utmost*

being', which all other things imitate to varying degrees (*Summa Theologiae* I.2., in 1920/1485 emphasis mine). The Fourth Way begins with the observation that '[among] beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like' (*ibid.*), which just is to say that there are better and lesser ways of existing, a claim that played an important role in my argument. Both arguments conclude with a supreme standard of existence or paradigm being, with the difference that mine doesn't depend on the controversial principle that '*the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus*' (*ibid.*).

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