Perhaps the best known objection to the "ontological" argument of St. Anselm is that "exists" is not a predicate, or, in the material mode, that existence is not a property. It is an objection that defenders of the argument like Norman Malcolm, Charles Hartshorne, and Alvin Plantinga accept, and it is in part because they accept it that they find a modal form of the argument necessary.

But what this strategy amounts to is to deny that existence is a property, but to insist straightway that necessary existence is one. Hartshorne says that, while existence is only sometimes a property, modality of existence always is. But by being a property he seems to mean being included in the definition of a thing. (Likewise, being a predicate would be for him being included in the definition of a word.) But this is quite odd, since we would not normally say that all of a thing's properties are part of its definition. What Hartshorne should say is that existence is always a property, although it is only sometimes included in the definition of a thing.

I find this distinction between existence and necessary existence quite unattractive. Necessary P-ness is a more, not less, philosophically recondite thing than simple P-ness, so that if "P" is not a predicate, it is difficult to see why "necessarily P" should be one. Moreover, if the reason existence is wanted as a property is that it should be a value, then it is hard to see why, if existence is not a value, necessary existence should be one. It seems, then, that all

This essay is drawn from my doctoral dissertation, The Very Idea of an Ontological Argument (University of California, Berkeley, 1971; Wallace I. Matson, advisor; Hans Sluga and Kevin Wall, O.P., committee in charge). I am indebted to the reader for Grazer Philosophische Studien for some suggestions.

forms of the argument are affected by the doctrine that “exists” is not a predicate.

Sometimes “‘exists’ is not a predicate” is used to make points more appropriately discussed without reference to the doctrine, such as that existence propositions cannot be necessary, or that ‘exists’ differs from other (grammatical) predicates in that whatever has any of them must have it — i.e., whatever is talked about (truly) must exist. Thus when Gassendi says that “existence is a perfection neither in God nor in anything else; it is rather that in the absence of which there is no perfection,” 6 the gist of what he is saying is that whatever has properties must exist. And when Kant says that “every reasonable person must [admit] that all existential statements are synthetic,” 7 he is merely saying that no existential statement like “God exists” can be necessary, the Kantian synthetic a priori not being (or so he thinks) in question here. What I will be concerned with in this essay is attempts to develop the claim that “exists” is not a predicate in relative independence of such doctrines. 8

On the face of it, “exists” is a predicate. “God exists” and “Sally runs” have the same (surface) grammatical structure. The burden is on the objector to show that appearances are deceiving, and that what is significant is that “exists” is, though a “logical”, not a “real” predicate, 9 or, though a “grammatical”, not a “logical” one. 10 Or to put the matter in the material mode, he must show that existence only appears to be a property, that it is not one in truth. It is to be presumed that things are what they seem, that what is a predicate in surface grammar is one all the way down, even if a predicate of a peculiar sort. This does not mean that reparsing for philosophical purposes is forbidden: only that the case for such reparsing must be made.

8. I have discussed the first of them in my article “Does St. Anselm Beg the Question?”, Philosophy 50 (1975). The second has a counter-example in the existence-claims if mathematics.