Descartes’ ontological argument

THE ARGUMENT

It is certain that I... find the idea of God in me, that is to say, the idea of a
supremely perfect being... And I know no less clearly and distinctly that an actual
and eternal existence belongs to his nature... existence can no more be separated
from the essence of God... than the idea of a mountain can be separated from the
idea of a valley; so that there is no less contradiction in conceiving a God, that is to
say, a supremely perfect being, who lacks some particular perfection, than in
conceiving a mountain without a valley. (144-5)

Descartes’ argument is very simple. There are two ways we may phrase it:
1. the idea of God contains the idea of existence;
2. therefore God must exist (the conclusion is not just that God does exist, but that
   God cannot not exist, i.e. God’s existence is necessary).

Or, with a little more unpacking,
1. God is a supremely perfect being;
2. existence is a perfection;
3. therefore, God must exist.

The quotation makes clear that the argument is grounded on two central claims of
Descartes’ philosophy – the theory of innate ideas and the doctrine of clear and distinct
ideas. The first theory supports the first premise, the definition of God as supremely
perfect. This just is the idea of God we find that we have. The second theory supports
the validity of the argument. Descartes claims that it is clear and distinct that the idea of
existence cannot be excluded from the idea of God, a supremely perfect being.

Descartes is aware that we might misunderstand him as claiming that ‘thinking makes it
so’. He objects to himself:

   just as it does not follow that merely because I conceive a mountain with a valley,
   there is any mountain in the world, so similarly, although I conceive God as having
   existence, it does not follow from that, that there is a God who actually exists
   (145).

But, he responds, the analogy is not between mountains and existence and God and
existence; but between mountains and valleys and God and existence. The idea of
existence is no part of the idea of a mountain. But just as the idea of a valley is implied by
the idea of a mountain, so the idea of existence is part of the idea of God. And so, as he
says, ‘I cannot conceive God without existence’ (145).

But what does this show? Just because I can’t think of God not existing, does that have
any relevance to whether or not God exists? Absolutely. The bounds of our thought are,
at least on some occasions, indications of what is possible. This isn’t because our thought
creates or influences reality, but because thought reveals reality. And so, Descartes
argues, the necessary connection between God and existence isn’t something I’ve come up with, it is something I discover:

the necessity which lies in the thing itself, that is, the necessity of the existence of God, determines me to think in this way: for it is not in my power to conceive a God without existence.... (145)

It is not that my thought brings about God’s existence (all my thinking can bring about is ideas!); rather the fact that God’s existence is necessary makes me think of God in this way, viz. as existing. How things are determines what I am able to think, rather than vice-versa. There is a conceptual connection between the concept of God and God’s existence, and this entails that God’s must exist.

This again rests on the doctrine of clear and distinct ideas. Descartes has argued that whatever one clearly and distinctly perceives is true. That we can clearly and distinctly perceive that existence is part of the idea of God, i.e. that there is a conceptual connection between the concept of God and God’s existence, entails that God must exist. Without this additional premise, Descartes admits elsewhere, the gap between thought and reality is not bridged.

**OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES**

**Concept and reality**

We may doubt, with the philosopher Gassendi, whether Descartes is right to claim that existence is part of the idea of God as a supremely perfect being. Can’t I form the idea of a God who does not exist?

Descartes replies by drawing our attention to the claim that the attributes of God all entail each other. Because our minds are finite, we normally think of the divine perfections – omnipotence, omniscience, etc. – separately and so we might not see immediately that they entail each other. But if we attend carefully to whether existence belongs to a supremely perfect being, and what sort of existence it is, we shall discover that we cannot conceive any one of the other attributes while excluding existence from it. For example, in order for God to be omnipotent, God must not depend on anything else, and so must not depend on anything else to exist. God cannot, then, go in and out of existence – so there can be no concept of a God that does not exist but might.

The conclusion of the ontological argument is not simply that God exists, but that God must exist. This is quite a different type of existence from our existence. We can go in and out of existence – our existence is contingent. But God’s existence is necessary. (The existence of a being is contingent if it could be true or false that that being exists, e.g. it could now exist, but later cease to exist. The existence of a being is necessary if it cannot come into or go out of existence; it is necessarily true that it exists (or doesn’t)).

At best, this is an argument for the claim that if God exists, God exists necessarily. But Descartes’ argument is still open to the objection, made famous by Aquinas and cited by Johannes Caterus in response to Descartes, that this doesn’t demonstrate that God actually exists. It only shows that the concept of existence is inseparable from the concept of God.
Descartes responds that this overlooks two things: first, his claim that clear and distinct ideas are true; and second, that necessary existence as part of the concept of God entails God's actual existence. If it is part of the concept of God that God must exist, then God must exist. However, this sounds like Descartes is begging the question, for Caterus' objection is precisely that the connection in the concept does not prove a connection in reality.

**Hume's objection**

The ontological argument doesn’t rely on sense experience, but on pure reasoning. So the argument, and its conclusion that God exists, are a priori. But, Hume argues, the only claims that can be known a priori are ‘relations of ideas’, or what we would now call analytic truths. These are ‘demonstrable’, i.e. they can be proven using reason. Take the claim ‘all vixens are female’. What is a vixen? By definition, it is a female fox. So ‘all vixens are female’ means ‘all female foxes are female’. To deny this is to contradict oneself.

If ‘God exists’ is a priori, then we shouldn't be able to deny it without contradicting ourselves: ‘Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary is a contradiction’, Hume says. But, he goes on, ‘Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no Being whose existence is demonstrable.’ (*Dialogues on Natural Religion*, § IX)

So Hume argues that God does not possess existence essentially – it is possible to conceive of God not existing (and still be thinking of God). And so the ontological argument fails.

However, Descartes denies that ‘whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent’. God is precisely a counter-example. Second, it may not be a contradiction *in terms* to say that ‘God does not exist’. But it is not a coherent thought. A priori reason, for Descartes, does not use only contradiction as a test. His theory of clear and distinct ideas is richer than this, an account of rational intuition. Hume assumes that all ‘demonstrable’ truths must be analytic. Rationalists would argue that there are synthetic a priori truths, and the claim that ‘God exists’ – if it is not analytic – could be one of these.

**Existence is not a property**

According to Immanuel Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*, Book II, Ch. 3, § 4), the ontological argument wrongly assumes that existence is a *property* (a perfection). But things don’t ‘have’ existence in the same way that they ‘have’ other properties. To say that the concept GOD contains the idea EXISTENCE (necessary existence belongs to God’s essence), Kant claims, is a mistake. Existence does not add anything to, or define, a concept itself; to say something exists is to say that some object corresponds to the concept. (To say something exists is always a synthetic judgment, not an analytic one, so it can’t be arrived at by analysing concepts.)

When we list the essential properties of something, we describe our concept of that thing. For instance, a dog is a mammal. But now if I tell you that the dog asleep in the corner is a mammal and it exists, I seem to have said two very different sorts of things. To say that it exists is only to say that there is something real that corresponds to the concept ‘dog’. It is not to say anything *about* the dog as a dog.
Existence, Kant argues, is not part of any concept, even in the case of God. To say that ‘God exists’ is quite different from saying that ‘God is omnipotent’. So it is not true to say that ‘God exists’ must be true.

**Necessary existence**

If existence isn’t a property that something ‘has’, then it can’t be a property that God has necessarily! And yet it seems plausible to think that if God exists, God exists necessarily. God cannot be a contingent being. If God’s existence were not necessary, God would depend on something else that could cause God to come into or go out of existence. If Kant were right, then not only can existence not be a property, necessary existence – as a type of existence – can’t be a property. So God can’t exist necessarily, even if God exists.

In fact, this doesn’t follow. There is still a sense in which God can exist necessarily, if God exists. Rather than saying ‘God has necessary existence’, which suggests existence is a property, we should say that ‘it is necessarily true that God exists’. The ‘necessity’ applies to the claim: ‘God exists’ must be true. Of course, we need an argument to support the claim, but at least it makes sense.

The ontological argument seems to say that because, according to the concept of God, God exists ‘necessarily’, that is not contingently, without dependence on anything else, then ‘God exists’ must be true. But this doesn’t follow; it confuses two meanings of ‘necessarily’.