The Ontological Argument

We rely on sight to confirm the existence of things. We don’t believe in things we can’t see.

So how do we know that no-see-ums exist? Verification is ruled out by definition.

It’s an ontological quandary.

Hold still a moment.

Ooh, I itch!

Glad I could help.
Arguments for God’s Existence

- One of the classic questions of philosophy and philosophical argument is: Is there a God?
- Of course there are and have been many different definitions of God, so it will be useful to have a particular definition of the being we are arguing about.
- Thus, for present purposes, we are asking, is there an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being?
- We can divide arguments for God’s existence into two categories based on how they are known: a priori and a posteriori
A Posteriori Arguments

- The vast majority of extant arguments are *a posteriori*
- These arguments say that there is something we find in the world which implies the existence of God
- Examples of these features of the world which are alleged to point to God include
  - The existence of the universe (cosmological arguments)
  - The existence of life in the universe (teleological arguments)
  - The existence of minds
  - The comprehensibility of the universe
  - The existence of moral properties in the universe
  - Various miracle claims
A Priori Arguments

- Unlike *a posteriori* arguments, I am only aware of two *a priori* arguments
- We have already encountered the Trademark argument, which says that God exists because only an infinite being could give me my idea of infinity.
- Notice that this is still arguing that God must exist in order to explain a certain feature of the world, but I include it as *a priori* because it depends only on propositions about the contents of my mind, so it is available to Descartes while he is in his state of extreme doubt.
- The other *a priori* argument due originally to Anselm is the Ontological argument
- The Ontological argument comes in various forms, but the common element is that it asserts that God’s existence can be proven simply from the concept of God.
Descartes’ Ontological Argument

- In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes is considering various mathematical and conceptual truths.

- For instance, we know simply by analyzing the concept “triangle” that the interior angles of a triangle equal two right angles.

- Likewise, we know by the concept “mountain” that wherever there is a mountain there is a valley.

- These truths do not tell us that there are any triangles or mountains in the world; we just know through conceptual analysis that if there is a mountain then there is a valley.

- Likewise, it is just as much a conceptual truth that God is perfect/has all perfections—that is just our concept of God.

- Then, crucially, it also follows by conceptual analysis that God exists, because “existence is a perfection.”

- Thus, it follows by conceptual analysis that God’s nature is to exist.

- This is just as certain as any mathematical theorem (such as the Pythagorean theorem).
Descartes’ Ontological Argument

- We can summarize Descartes’ argument:
  1. The idea of God is the idea of a thing with all perfections
  2. Existence is a perfection
  C. Therefore, God exists

- What do you think?
Critiques of the Ontological Argument

- The ontological argument (in this form and in Anselm’s form) is one of the most criticized in the history of philosophy.
- Essentially everyone feels like it is cheating in some way, but people disagree greatly on exactly what is going wrong.
- Kant (and Gassendi) said that the problem is, existence is not a perfection, because existence is not a property.
- Imagine anything, and then imagine that it “exists”; what changed in your imagination?
- According to Kant, existence is not something we can ascribe to something but rather is a presupposition of ascribing any other properties. Therefore, the second premise is false.
Critiques of the Ontological Argument

- While it seems like Kant is on to something, it is difficult to see why it would follow that existence is not said of anything. After all, we do say that some things exist and others don’t—for instance, there was once an ESPN headline that said “Lennay Kekua does not exist”; had there been a person Lennay Kekua, it would have been quite natural to say that she exists.

- What seems to be the problem is not that nothing has the property “existence,” but everything has it.

- More to the point, what seems to follow from Kant’s “imagination” comments is that existence is a part of every concept we have.

- We cannot conceive of a thing without conceiving of its existing.

- However, it doesn’t follow from this that everything we have a concept of exists. So what’s the problem?
I don’t think Descartes’ original argument was valid. To make it valid, we can either rewrite premise 1 or the conclusion.

To keep the original conclusion we can say:

(1) God has all perfections
(2) Existence is a perfection
(C) Therefore, God exists

The problem is, this assumes the existence of God in premise 1. What could that sentence be asserting if not that a particular being has certain properties?
Reformulating Ontological Argument

To keep the original conclusion we can say:

1. The idea of God is the idea of a thing with all perfections
2. Existence is a perfection
3. Therefore, the idea of God is the idea of a being that exists

What follows from this conclusion?

Just as we said that if there is a mountain, then there is a valley, the same seems to be true of our conceptual analysis of God.

If there is a God, then God exists.

But this doesn’t make God special in any way—the same could be said of you or me.
A Second Ontological Argument

- Rather than going these ways, Descartes responded to the criticism by saying that it is not “existence” that is the important perfection, but “necessary” existence.

- This gives us the argument:
  1. The idea of God is the idea of a thing with all perfections
  2. Existence is a perfection
  3. Therefore, the idea of God is the idea of a being that exists necessarily

- Does it follow from this that to ascribe non-existence to God is equivalent to ascribing to the interior angles of a triangle that they do not equal two right angles?
A Second Ontological Argument

- While “necessary existence” is a part of the concept of God and not a part of the concept of everything else, it is not contradictory to say that nothing falls under this concept.
- However, something interesting does follow—it is a contradiction to say that God does not exist but could
- I am contingent; so are you. I exist, but I might not have (if for instance, there had never been human life)
- Likewise, it is a contingent fact that I do not have a sister; my parents could have had another child which was a girl, so I could have had a sister.
- What follows from Descartes’ second argument is that contingency cannot be true of God.
- If God exists, it is not possible for him to never have existed, and if he doesn’t exist, then it is not possible for him to have existed.
Necessary Existence

▶ Consider again the claim “the idea of God is the idea of a being that exists necessarily.” Suppose there is a God. It follows immediately that God exists necessarily, so the idea of there being another scenario in which God did not exist is a contradiction.

▶ Suppose on the other hand that there is no God, but that God’s existence is possible. When we consider possible scenarios in which God exists, is our present scenario still possible?

▶ We are actual; if something is actual then it is possible, so it seems like no matter what, our world would have to be listed as a possibility. But, if in imagining a scenario in which God existed we are imagining a scenario in which it would be possible for him to not exist, then we are in fact imagining an impossible scenario (as proved above).

▶ Thus, if God does not exist, then it is not possible (in the broadest sense of possible) that God exist.

▶ Thus, God’s existence is either necessary or impossible.
The Second Ontological Argument examined

- God’s existence is either necessary or impossible.
- Thus, if we could so much as prove that it is possible for God to exist, it would follow that God exists, but how could we prove that?
- One of our best guides to what is possible is what we can imagine
- For instance, you might think it was possible for you to skip class today because you can clearly imagine a lot of scenarios in which you stayed in your room and slept, or played games, or etc.; this standard will come up a lot more when we discuss the mind-body problem.
- Some people have thought that they can just “see” or “imagine” that it is possible that God exists
- In response to this, Peter van Inwagen invites us to use that same standard to determine whether or not it is possible for there to be someone who knows that God does not exist
- If it is possible that someone knows that God does not exist, then it is possible that God does not exist; hence, God’s existence is impossible.
- Both imaginings seem to be on a par, so we don’t really know how to break the tie.
The Second Ontological Argument examined

- God’s existence is either necessary or impossible
- Various other people have tried to prove God’s existence possible
- Leibniz and Gödel have tried to argue that the only way something can be impossible is if it involves negation or limitation; since our concept of God only involves positive/affirmative properties, it cannot be contradictory.
- Others have argued that since we have thought about the concept of God for a long time and not found a contradiction, that is good evidence for God being possible
- Others think we have have proven God is impossible because one of the omni-properties is impossible to have.
- It remains an ongoing debate.