The ontological argument

St Anselm and Descartes both famously presented an ontological argument for the existence of God. (The word 'ontological' comes from 'ontology', the study of (-ology) of what exists or 'being' (ont).) Their versions of the argument are slightly different, but they both argue that we can deduce the existence of God from the idea of God. Just from thinking about what God is, we can conclude that God must exist. Because it doesn't depend on experience in any way, the ontological argument is a priori.

ST ANSELM'S VERSION OF THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Anselm's argument relies on 'conceivability':

1. By definition, God is a being greater than which cannot be conceived.
2. I can conceive of such a being.
3. It is greater to exist than not to exist.
4. Therefore, God must exist.

The idea of God as the most perfect possible being has a long history. And perfection has also been connected to reality: what is perfect is more real than what is not. Anselm's argument makes use of both these ideas.

Anselm starts from a definition of God – if we could think of something that was greater than the being we called God, then surely this greater thing would in fact be God. But this is nonsense – God being greater than God. The first being isn't God at all. We cannot conceive of anything being greater than God – if we think we can, we're not thinking of God.

The second premise says that this idea – a being greater than which we cannot conceive – is coherent. Now, if we think of two beings, one that exists and one that doesn't, the one that actually exists is greater – being real is greater than being fictional! So if God didn't exist, we could think of a greater being than God. But we've said that's impossible; so God exists.

OBJECTIONS

Gaunilo and the perfect island

Anselm received an immediate reply from a monk named Gaunilo: you could prove anything perfect must exist by this argument! I can conceive of the perfect island, greater than which cannot be conceived. And so such an island must exist, because it would be less great if it didn't. But this is ridiculous, so the ontological argument must be flawed. You can't infer the existence of something, Gaunilo argues, from the idea of its being perfect.

Anselm replied that the ontological argument works only for God, because the relation between God and greatness or perfection is unique. An island wouldn't cease to be what

it is – an island – if it wasn't perfect; of course, it wouldn't then be a perfect island. But islands aren't perfect by definition; perfection is something an island can have or not have. It is an 'accidental' not an 'essential' property of islands. It's perfectly coherent to think of an island that isn't perfect.

(An essential property is one that something must have to be the thing that it is. Islands must be areas of land surrounded by water. Can we say that 'perfect islands' are islands that are essentially perfect? Not convincingly, because perfect islands aren't a different kind of thing from islands, but a type of island. So they are still only essentially islands, and accidentally perfect.)

By contrast, God, argues Anselm, must be the greatest conceivable being – God wouldn't be God if there was some being even greater than God – it's incoherent to think of God as imperfect. Being the greatest conceivable being is an essential property of God. But then because it is better to exist than not, existence is an essential property of God. So to be the greatest conceivable being, God must exist.

Hume on necessary existence
Notice that this conclusion is more than 'God does exist'; it claims God must exist – God's existence is necessary. That isn't true of you or me or islands – we can exist or not, we come into existence and cease to exist. Our existence is contingent. (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).) The ontological argument only works for God, says Anselm, because only God's existence could be necessary.

Hume argued that the idea of 'necessary existence' was meaningless (*Dialogues on Natural Religion*, § IX). To understand his claim, we need to understand what Hume thought about knowledge. Hume argues that we can have knowledge of just two sorts of thing: the relations between ideas and matters of fact (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, § IV) His distinction was developed by later philosophers, and is now understood in terms two distinctions: analytic/synthetic and a priori/a posteriori.

Matters of fact we establish through sense experience, and are a matter of evidence and probability. 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 the only claims that can be known a priori are 'relations of ideas'. These are 'demonstrable', i.e. provable, not a matter of probability, but certain. 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 not all female foxes are female, then some female foxes are not female. But how can a female fox not be female?!

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.

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). So God does not exist necessarily. And so the ontological argument for God's existence fails.

However, Hume assumes that all demonstrable truths must be analytic. Rationalists would argue that there are synthetic a priori truths that are demonstrable as well, and the claim that 'God exists' could be one of these.

DESCARTES AND PERFECTION

We saw St Anselm's version of the ontological argument relied on the inconceivability of anything greater than God. Descartes' version of the argument relies on perfection alone, not conceivability:

> It is certain that I... find the idea of a God in my consciousness, that is the idea of a being supremely perfect: and I know with... clearness and distinctness that an [actual and] eternal existence pertains to his nature... existence can no more be separated from the essence of God, than the idea of a mountain from that of a valley... it is not less impossible to conceive a God, that is, a being supremely perfect, to whom existence is wanting, or who is devoid of a certain perfection, than to conceive a mountain without a valley. (*Meditation* V)

Descartes' argument is this:

1. I have the idea of God;
2. God is a supremely perfect being;
3. Existence is a perfection;
4. Therefore, God must exist.

Development
We can object that there is a gap between the idea that God exists eternally and God actually existing eternally. Descartes is aware of this, and objects to himself:

> just as it does not follow that there is any mountain in the world merely because I conceive a mountain with a valley, so likewise, though I conceive God as existing, it does not seem to follow on that account that God exists.

But, he replies,

> the cases are not analogous... it does not follow that there is any mountain or valley in existence, but simply that the mountain or valley, whether they do or do not exist, are inseparable from each other; whereas, on the other hand, because I cannot conceive God unless as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from him, and therefore that he really exists.

Descartes is arguing that 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 can't think of God without thinking that God exists.

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.

There is a conceptual connection between the concept of God and God's existence, and this entails that God's must exist.

OBJECTIONS TO DESCARTES

Gassendi objects that existence is not part of the idea of God as a supremely perfect being. Can't I form the idea of a God who does not exist? (This is similar to Hume's objection.) Descartes replies by drawing claiming, with St Thomas Aquinas, that divine perfections all entail each other. Because our minds are finite, we normally think of the divine perfections – omnipotence, omniscience, necessary existence, etc. – separately and 'hence may not immediately notice the necessity of their being joined together'. But if we reflect carefully, we shall discover that we cannot conceive any one of the other attributes while excluding necessary 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.

However, Aquinas didn't think that existence is a perfection. He objects, and Johannes Caterus put the point to Descartes, that the ontological argument doesn't demonstrate that God really exists. It only shows that the concept of existence is inseparable from the concept of God. Descartes' argument is only convincing for the claim that if God exists, God exists necessarily.

Descartes accepts that what he has shown is that necessary existence is part of the concept of God. But this, he responds, is enough: necessary existence entails actual existence. That God must exist to be God means that God exists. But Caterus says this isn't enough: the question is whether the concept of necessary existence entails actual existence.

KANT

Everyone now agrees the problem lies with Descartes' premise (3). What is a 'perfection'? It's a property that it is better to have than not have. So is existence this kind of property? Descartes and Anselm are supposing that it is – that something that 'has' existence is greater than something that doesn't.

Immanuel Kant developed the objection to this claim (*Critique of Pure Reason*, Book II, Ch. 3, § 4). Things don't 'have' existence in the same way that they 'have' other properties. Consider whether 'God exists' is an analytic or synthetic judgment. According to Descartes, it must be analytic: his argument is that 'God does not exist' is a contradiction in terms, for the concept 'God' contains the idea of existence (necessary existence belongs to God's essence). But, Kant claims, this 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.

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'.