

Chapter 26  
**Ontological Arguments That God Exists**

God is perfect. That is to say, of any positive or good attribute that a thing could have, God possesses it and possesses it completely. That God is perfect follows directly from the concept of God. Existence is a perfection—a positive or good attribute—among the other perfections. That is to say, a being that doesn't exist is less perfect than an exactly similar being that does exist. So, God, being perfect, has all perfections, including existence. Therefore, God exists.

The above argument is an ontological argument that God exists. Here is another:

I conceive of a being than which no greater being can be conceived, a being omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly loving and just. If this being of which no being greater can be conceived were not to exist, then I could conceive of an even greater being, specifically, the being of which no being greater can be conceived and which does exist. So it is a feature of the being than which no greater being can be conceived that He exists. Thus, the being than which no greater being can be conceived does exist. Therefore, God, the omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly just and loving being than which no greater being can be conceived, exists.

Is either of these two arguments sound? Does either go any way at all toward showing that God exists?

An argument that God exists is classified as an ontological argument if it begins simply with the concept of God and attempts to find in that concept reason for thinking a being answering to that concept exists. In our first ontological argument, the idea from within the concept of God on which the argument turns is the idea that God is perfect. In our second ontological argument, the idea from within the concept of God on which the argument turns is the idea that no being greater than God can be conceived. The first argument seems to say that since a being would not be perfect if it didn't exist, the perfect being, God, exists. The second argument seems to say that if God doesn't exist, then we could conceive of a being even greater than God; but since God is the being than which none greater can be conceived, God must exist.

According to critics of these arguments, to infer from the concept of a thing to the existence of that thing is always illicit. Suppose I hold that a perfectly square table is a table each corner of which is 90° and each side of which is exactly as long as every other side. I cannot conclude from my idea of a perfectly square table that any such table exists. All I can conclude is that if a perfectly square table exists, then each of its corners is 90° and each of its sides is exactly as long as every other of its sides. My premise implies nothing about what exists. Or, I might hold that being perfectly square is a perfection and, as such, must be instantiated in something in the world. But then I have built into my conception of perfection the concept of existing. I can conclude that a perfectly square table exists, but only because I have begged the question by assuming in my premise that one exists.

To generalize from our table example, we can say that our concept of a thing tells us what something that exists would have to be like in order to be an instance of that thing. Our concept cannot itself tell us whether anything answering to it exists. Or, our concept of something cannot itself tell us whether anything that does exist satisfies it except by making “existing thing” one of the ingredients in the concept, and that would be to beg the question

whether the thing of which we conceive exists.

These points can be summarized in the slogan that existence is not a property that a thing might or might not have. A particular looney of which I conceive but that does not exist does not have all the properties of a looney that does exist except the property of existence. It has no properties at all; there is no *it* there. A cool, yellow, wet thing of which I conceive but which does not exist is not exactly like, save in just one respect, a cool, yellow, wet thing of that does exist. Again, the thing of which I conceive but which does not exist is no thing at all and so not a cool, yellow, wet thing that happens to lack the property of existence.

Let us see how these remarks apply to each of the two ontological arguments with which we began.

1) God is perfect; existence is a perfection; therefore, God exists. True, the concept of God is the concept of a perfect being. But to say that existence is a perfection in the way that, say, goodness is a perfection is to hold that existing is a property a thing might or might not have. But existence is not a property; things, ghosts, for instance, that don't exist but of which we can conceive are not simply lacking existence while possessing other properties. So, from the premise that God is perfect we can conclude only that no imperfect thing is God.

2) The being of which I conceive than which no greater being can be conceived must exist, or else I could conceive of an even greater being, a being greater than the being than which no greater can be conceived. So God exists. In this argument, the concept of existing is built right into the concept of being the greatest being of which one can conceive. But that is to put the concept of actually existing already in the premise that I conceive of a being than which none greater can be conceived. To do so is to assume what is supposed to be shown, namely, that the being than which no being greater can be conceived exists. Thus, this ontological argument begs the question of God's existence. It assumes in its premises that God exists.

Let us consider one final ontological argument that God exists. Nothing that does not exist is God; therefore, God exists. Now it is true that no non-existing thing is the existing God. But that does not imply that some existing thing is the existing God. No non-existing thing is anything at all. All we can conclude from the fact that no non-existing thing is the existing God is that either the existing God exists or nothing is the existing God. But we knew that already.

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Philosophers who reject ontological arguments that God exists find the above criticisms of ontological arguments almost obvious and yet completely devastating to those arguments. Clearly, the critics say, we cannot legitimately hold in any case at all that given our conception of a thing, whatever that conception involves, some actual thing answers to that conception. As well, clearly, they add, taking the existence of the thing as part of its conception begs the question whether it exists. Yet in spite of these criticisms one or another philosopher continues to propose and defend one or another ontological argument. We critics of the ontological approach to showing that God exists worry that we have missed something. But what could it be?