

The Ontological Argument

Notes on Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, chapter 6

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Ontological Argument - Version 1

1. God has all perfections. (by definition)
2. Existence is a perfection.

Therefore, 3. God has existence.

Objection 1: Existence is not a Property

Kant's objection: "existence is not a predicate"

What does Kant mean? The word "exists" is clearly a predicate in the grammatical sense.

Kant seems to mean that, although "exists" is a grammatical predicate, it does not express a property of objects.

Objection 1: Existence is not a Property - continued

Two related arguments for this:

1. properties distinguish some objects from others: for example, the property of being red distinguishes the red things from the non-red ones. But existence does not divide objects into two groups in this way. Consider every object in the world: every one of them exists!
2. To add the supposed property of existence to a definition does not seem to change anything except to add a redundancy. Consider the set of all the hamburgers in the world. Now consider the set of all the existing hamburgers in the world. The two sets are exactly the same!

Objection 2: Conclusion is too Weak

A second objection is the one van Inwagen thinks is more telling. A good way to get a feel for the second objection is to consider how we might formalize the argument.

1. $\forall x (\text{IsGod}(x) \rightarrow \text{IsPerfect}(x))$

2. $\forall x (\text{IsPerfect}(x) \rightarrow \text{Exists}(x))$

Therefore, 3. $\forall x (\text{IsGod}(x) \rightarrow \text{Exists}(x))$

Notice that the conclusion does not imply that God exists, only that, if anything is God, that thing must exist (i.e. if there is a God, God exists). This trivial conclusion is hardly what the ontological arguer wants, but it may be all he or she can get. A definition can't say that God exists, only what properties God has, if he exists. So it does not seem that we can strengthen premise 1.

Ontological Argument - Version 2

1. God has all perfections. (by definition)
2. Necessary existence is a perfection.

Therefore, 3. God has necessary existence.

Therefore, 4. God exists.

This is exactly the same as version 1, except that “necessary existence” has replaced “existence.” But this seems to avoid the worry that existence is not a property, since necessary existence is not shared by everything.

Version 2 - Objection

However, the argument still faces objection 2, which emerges unscathed from the change:

1. $\forall x (\text{IsGod}(x) \rightarrow \text{IsPerfect}(x))$
2. $\forall x (\text{IsPerfect}(x) \rightarrow \text{NecessarilyExists}(x))$

Therefore, 3. $\forall x (\text{IsGod}(x) \rightarrow \text{NecessarilyExists}(x))$

Changing “Exists” to “Necessarily Exists” does not alter the fact that the conclusion can only show that God has this property if he exists, not that he does in fact exist.

Ontological Argument - Version 3

The third version is trickier.

1. It is possible that God exists.

Therefore, 2. There is a possible world in which God exists.

3. If God exists, then God exists necessarily.

(The too-weak conclusion of version 2.)

Therefore, 4. There is a possible world in which God exists necessarily.

5. What is necessary in any possible world is necessary in all.

Therefore, 6. God exists necessarily.

Therefore, 7. God exists.

Note that a critic of the argument could question either premise 1 (insisting that it is necessarily false that God exists), or premise 3. (One ground for questioning 3 might be a rejection of the view that necessary existence is a perfection.)