

Descartes' ontological argument¹

Descartes provides three arguments for the existence of God, his Trademark argument, a cosmological argument, and an ontological argument. Ontological arguments claim that we can deduce the existence of God from the concept of God. They argue that once we understand the concept GOD, we understand that a being corresponding to this concept, God, must exist.

DESCARTES' ARGUMENT

Descartes' argument relies heavily on his doctrine of clear and distinct ideas (for more on this doctrine, see the handout on 'Reason, intuition and knowledge'). He opens *Meditation V* by explaining how we can explore our concepts in thought to gain knowledge. For example, you may think that there can be triangles whose internal angles don't add up to 180 degrees, but reflection proves this impossible. Our thought is constrained in this way. The ideas we have determine certain truths, at least when our ideas are clear and distinct. Once you make the idea of a triangle (the concept TRIANGLE) clear and distinct, you understand that the internal angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees, and this shows that this is, in fact, true.

We can now apply this method to the concept of GOD. Descartes' argument is very brief:

The idea of God (that is, of a supremely perfect being) is certainly one that I find within me . . . ; and I understand from this idea that it belongs to God's nature that he always exists.

We can understand this passage either in terms of rational intuition of the clear and distinct idea of GOD or as a very short deduction from such a clear and distinct idea. Understood the first way, Descartes is arguing that careful reflection on the concept of GOD reveals that to think that God does not exist is a contradiction in terms, because it is part of the concept of a supremely perfect being that such a being has existence. Thus, we can know that it is true that God exists.

In fact, it shows that God must exist. A contradiction in terms does not just happen to be false, it must be false. So to say 'God does not exist' must be false; so 'God exists' must be true.

As in the case of the triangle, it is not our thinking it that makes the claim true. Just as the concept TRIANGLE forces me to acknowledge that the internal angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees, so the concept GOD forces me to acknowledge that God exists.

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 171-4

Furthermore, I cannot simply change the concept in either case; I can't decide that triangles will have two sides nor that it is no part of the concept of a supremely perfect being that such a being exists. I haven't invented the concept of GOD.

One striking puzzle is why Descartes thinks that the concept of a supremely perfect being includes the thought that such a being exists. Spelling this out (P4 below) gives us a short deductive argument:

- P1. I have the idea of God.
- P2. The idea of God is the idea of a supremely perfect being.
- P3. A supremely perfect being does not lack any perfection.
- P4. Existence is a perfection.
- C1. Therefore, God exists.

But why should we accept (P4)? In the main body of the *Meditations*, Descartes doesn't say. However, in an appendix to the *Meditations*, known as 'Objections and Replies', Descartes explains that God's existence is entailed by the other perfections of God. For example, a supremely perfect being is omnipotent, possessing all power it is logically possible to possess. An omnipotent being cannot depend on any other being for its existence, since then it would lack a power, viz. the power to cause its own existence. An omnipotent being has this power and so depends on nothing else to exist. Such a being exists eternally, never coming into being or going out of being. As a supremely perfect being, God is omnipotent by definition, and so God must exist.

God is the only concept that supports this inference to existence, because only the concept of God (as supremely perfect) includes the concept of existence (as a perfection). We can't infer the existence of anything else this way.

AN EMPIRICIST RESPONSE TO DESCARTES' ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Empiricists claim that nothing can be shown to exist by a priori reasoning. It is not self-contradictory to say that God does not exist. Hume provides an example of this response. Hume's fork separates what we can know a priori - 'relations of ideas' - from claims about what exists - 'matters of fact'. Matters of fact can't be established by a priori reasoning, but require experience. So anything that can be established by a priori reasoning must be a relation of ideas.

In his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume provides an objection to Descartes' argument:

- P1. Nothing that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction.
- P2. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent.
- C1. Therefore, there is no being whose non-existence implies a contradiction.

We can put the argument another way: If 'God does not exist' is a contradiction, then 'God exists' is an analytic truth. But this can't be right, because claims about what exists are matters of fact, synthetic propositions.

Descartes could respond in either of two ways. He could claim that 'God exists' is a synthetic truth, but one that can be known by a priori reflection. Or he could claim that 'God exists' is an analytic truth, though not an obvious one. Because he doesn't have the concepts 'analytic' and 'synthetic' (they were invented 150 years later, by Kant), he doesn't, of course, say either. Instead, he defends his claim as the product of rational intuition (and perhaps deduction).

On these grounds, he rejects Hume's (P2). Because our minds are finite, we normally think of the divine perfections, such as omnipotence and necessary existence, separately and so we don't notice that they entail one another. But if we reflect carefully, we shall discover that we cannot conceive of one while excluding the other. It is a contradiction to deny that God exists.