Kant's objection to ontological arguments[1]

Ontological arguments claim that we can deduce the existence of God from the concept 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.

TWO ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

In the *Proslogium*, Anselm starts from the concept of God as a being 'greater than which cannot be conceived'. Anselm then argues that 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.

P1. By definition, God is a being greater than which cannot be conceived.
P2. (We can coherently conceive of such a being, i.e. the concept is coherent.)
P3. It is greater to exist in reality than to exist only in the mind.
C1. Therefore, God must exist.

Descartes presents a different version. First, he argues that 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.

Understood the second way, we get this 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.

'EXISTENCE IS NOT A PREDICATE'

Kant presents what many philosophers consider to be the most powerful objection to any ontological argument. Ontological arguments misunderstand what existence is, or what it is to say that something exists. Premise (3) of Anselm's argument and premise (4) of Descartes' argument are both false. Things don't 'have' existence in the same way that they 'have' other properties. So existence can't be a perfection or make something 'greater'.

How does Kant argue for this claim? Consider again whether 'God exists' is an analytic or synthetic judgement. In claiming that 'God does not exist' is a contradiction, it seems that Anselm and Descartes take 'God exists' to be an analytic judgement. Now, an analytic judgement, such as 'A triangle has three sides', unpacks a concept. The concept in the predicate, THREE SIDES, is part of the concept in the subject, TRIANGLE. And so the analytic truth 'A triangle has three sides' tells you something about what triangles are. By contrast, saying '*x* exists' does *not* add anything to a concept of what *x* is. It doesn't tell you anything more about *x*. 'Dogs exist' doesn't inform you about what dogs are.

In fact, not only does it not unpack a concept, EXISTENCE doesn't add anything to the subject at all. Put another way, 'existence' isn't a real predicate. If I say 'The kite is red', I add the concept RED onto the concept KITE, and can create the new concept of a red kite. But if I say 'The kite exists' or 'The kite is', this adds nothing to the concept of the kite to create a richer or more detailed concept. The concept of existence is not a concept that can be added into the concept of something.

So what does '*x* exists' actually mean? It simply claims that something corresponds to my concept in the world. '*x*' is an object of possible experience.

Once we understand how '*x* exists' works and how analytic statements work, we can see that the claim that *x* exists is not an analytic statement. It is, instead, a synthetic statement, one that will need to be verified against experience. But if '*x* exists' is a synthetic statement, it is not contradictory to deny it.

This applies even in the case of God. 'God exists' is just 'God is'; it doesn't add anything to, or unpack, the concept of God. Suppose we try to add the concept EXISTENCE to another concept. This makes no difference to that other concept. For example, there is no difference between the concept of 100 real thalers (the money of Kant's day) and the concept of 100 possible thalers. Adding the concept of EXISTENCE to the concept of THALERS does not make the thalers exist. Likewise, we can't add the concept of EXISTENCE to GOD and draw the conclusion that God exists.

We can formalise Kant's argument like this:

P1. If 'God does not exist' is a contradiction, then 'God exists' is an analytic truth.

P2. If 'God exists' is an analytic truth, then EXISTENCE is part of the concept GOD.

P3. Existence is not a predicate, something that can be added on to another concept.

C1. Therefore, EXISTENCE is not part of the concept GOD.

C1. Therefore, 'God exists' is not an analytic truth.

C2. Therefore, 'God does not exist' is not a contradiction.

C3. Therefore, we cannot deduce the existence of God from the concept of God.

C4. Therefore, ontological arguments cannot prove that God exists.