Malcolm's ontological argument[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. In this handout, we discuss Norman Malcolm's ontological argument from 'Anselm's ontological arguments'. This handout follows the handout 'Kant's objection to ontological arguments'. You should read that handout first.

MALCOLM'S ARGUMENT

In the first version of his ontological argument, Anselm compares a being which exists with a being that does not exist, and argues that the former is greater. He then goes on to compare a being whose non-existence is inconceivable and a being whose non-existence is conceivable, and argues that the former is greater. In making this second comparison, Malcolm points out, we aren't comparing what exists with what doesn't, but the concept of something that, by its nature, may or may not exist with the concept of something that, by its nature, must exist.

In his objection to ontological arguments, Kant argues that we cannot think of existence as a 'property' or 'predicate' – something that an object 'has' or not. Existence cannot, therefore, be something that makes a being 'greater'. Malcolm accepts this argument as it applies to existence. However, he argues, the same is not true of *necessary existence*. Anselm's second comparison works where his first does not.

We can show that necessary existence is part of the concept of God. 'God is the greatest possible being' is a logically necessary truth – it is part of our concept of God. Therefore, God's existence cannot depend on anything – because a being that depends on something else for its existence is not as great as a being whose existence is completely independent of anything else. So God cannot depend on anything for coming into existence or staying in existence.

Malcolm continues: Suppose God exists. Then God cannot cease to exist – nothing can cause God to cease to exist. In that case, God's non-existence is inconceivable. So if God exists, God exists necessarily. Suppose God doesn't exist. Then if God came into existence, God's existence would then be dependent on whatever caused or allowed God to exist. This, we said, is impossible. So if God does not exist, then God's existence is impossible.

P1.   Either God exists or God does not exist.
P2.   God cannot come into existence or go out of existence.
P3.   If God exists, God cannot cease to exist.
C1.   Therefore, if God exists, God's existence is necessary.
P4.   If God does not exist, God cannot come into existence.
C2.   Therefore, if God does not exist, God's existence is impossible.
C3.   Therefore, God's existence is either necessary or impossible.

Malcolm now adds two further premises to complete the ontological argument:

P5.   God's existence is impossible only if the concept of God is self-
        contradictory.
P6.   The concept of God is not self-contradictory.
C4.   Therefore, God's existence is not impossible.
C5.   Therefore (from (C3) + (C4)), God exists necessarily.

One objection to Malcolm's argument is that he has not shown that (P6) is true; is the concept of God coherent? Malcolm admits that he can think of no general proof that it is. But there should be no presupposition that the concept is incoherent, so the argument is sound unless we can *show* that the concept of God is incoherent.

MALCOLM'S REPLY TO KANT

Malcolm agrees with Kant that *contingent* existence is not a property, but argues that Kant does not show that *necessary* existence is not a property. Kant discusses the claim 'God exists', but he doesn't satisfactorily distinguish it from the claim 'God exists necessarily'. The two claims are not equivalent. To say that 'God exists necessarily' *is* to unpack the concept of God. It tells us more about what the concept GOD is a concept of. So it is an analytic judgement, not a synthetic one. Not all claims about existence have the same kind of meaning. Or again, the concept NECESSARY EXISTENCE has a different logic from the concept EXISTENCE.

Kant accepts that it is part of our concept of the greatest possible being that such a being would exist necessarily. But what this means, he says, is that 'if God exists, then God exists necessarily'. And this doesn't entail that God exists. In other words, the claim 'if God exists, then God exists necessarily' is compatible with the possibility that God doesn't exist at all.

Malcolm responds that this is confused. If we accept that 'God exists necessarily' is an analytic truth, derived from our concept of God, then this rules out 'it is possible that God doesn't exist'. 'God doesn't exist' is necessarily false.

A RESPONSE TO MALCOLM

But is Malcolm right? Is 'God exists necessarily' an analytic truth that we can derive from our concept of God? Or is the analytic truth that we can derive, only 'if God exists, God exists necessarily', as Kant claims?

Malcolm understands necessary existence as a property. It is the *type* of existence that God has if God exists. The concept of God entails that God's existence does not depend on anything. This means that if God does not exist, then God cannot be *brought* into existence (because then God's existence *would* depend on something). In *this* sense, if God does not exist, God's existence is impossible. But this impossibility is not the same as the existence of something logically impossible. So *(P5) is false*. If God does not exist, what makes God's existence impossible is not the self-contradictory nature of the concept of God, but the self-contradiction in the idea of bringing into existence something that does not depend on anything for existence.

This has implications for (C4). Let's allow that the concept of God is coherent. We still cannot conclude that God's existence is not impossible. If God does not exist, then God's existence *is* impossible. Given our concept of God, whether God's existence is impossible or not depends on whether God exists or doesn't. The problem is, we still don't know whether God exists or not!

The only conclusion that we can draw from Malcolm's argument is that 'if God doesn't exist, God's existence is impossible' and 'if God exists, God exists necessarily'. Not depending on anything characterises the nature of God's existence, if God exists; but existence does not characterise God. Or put another way, for it to be true that God exists necessarily, it must be true that God exists. Until we know whether God exists, all we can say is that God would exist necessarily if God were to exist.