

Objections To The Ontological Argument

Kant rejects the Ontological Argument as follows:

1. Subjects and Predicates: Kant begins by explaining how subjects and predicates function together. The Ontological Argument claims that a contradiction arises when you assert "God does not exist" because the predicate "existence" is one of the predicates contained within the concept "God." In other words, since existence is an essential property of God, saying "God does not exist" is like saying "A triangle does not have three sides" (since three-sidedness is an essential property of triangles).

But, Kant says, the contradiction only arises when you assert the EXISTENCE of the subject without one or more of its essential properties (i.e., it WOULD be a contradiction to say, "God exists, and doesn't exist." But, if all that you are asserting is that NEITHER the subject NOR the predicates (properties) exist, then no contradiction arises.

For instance, It would be a contradiction to say that, "A triangle exists, but it lacks three sides." This is because "three-sidedness" is ESSENTIAL to triangles. An object CANNOT BE a triangle if it lacks this feature. However, it would not be a contradiction to say that, "Neither triangles nor three sidedness exist." This is because you're no longer asserting a contradiction about an object and its properties. You're simply denying the existence of the object altogether.

In other words, when we say that triangles necessarily have 3 sides, what we mean is, "IF triangles exist, then they must have 3 sides." Similarly, demonstrating that God has existence as a perfection only means that, "IF God exists, then He exists necessarily."

Admittedly, since one of God's essential features is "existence", then it WOULD be a contradiction to say that, "God exists, yet He lacks existence." However, there is nothing contradictory in merely claiming that "Neither God nor his essence, which is existence, exist." Again, you are simply denying the existence of the object altogether, so no contradiction arises. Kant writes,

when you say, God does not exist, neither omnipotence nor any other predicate is affirmed; they must all disappear with the subject, and in this judgment there cannot exist the least self-contradiction.

To illustrate this point, consider the concept of "an existing unicorn." It would be a contradiction to assert that "An existing unicorn does not exist." So, have we now proved that there ARE existing unicorns? Clearly not.

2. “Existence” is not a predicate: Why doesn't the fact that we have a coherent concept of “an existing unicorn” prove that there IS one? It DOES seem to be a contradiction to say that “An existing unicorn does not exist.” But, clearly, this is no proof that unicorns DO exist. Where have we gone wrong?

Kant states that the mistake is made when we treat “existence” as a predicate. A predicate is a thing you ascribe to a subject, and it is supposed to ADD something to the concept of that subject. For instance, I might say, “Imagine a one hundred dollar bill. ...Now imagine that the bill is *crumpled*.” Here, “crumpled” is a predicate (or, property) which ADDS something to your concept of the hundred dollar bill. But, imagine that I then say, “Now imagine that the crumpled bill EXISTS.” Have I added anything to your concept? Do you now picture the bill in some new way? Kant says no. Existence does not add anything to the concept.

Existence, Kant says, does not function grammatically as a predicate, but rather as a copula. For instance, when we say, “The bill is crumpled,” we are uniting two concepts: the bill, and crumpled. The word “is” merely indicates the relation between the subject and the predicate. This is the function of a copula.

Having established that existence is not a predicate, we can see why the ontological argument fails. The concept of “an existing unicorn” is not any different than the concept of a “unicorn.” This is because “existing” is not a property. So, we do not need to say that “An existing unicorn does not exist.” All we really mean is “A unicorn does not exist.”

Likewise, with God. If existence is not a predicate, then it is not one of the “perfections” that the supremely perfect being needs to possess. So, we do not need to assert the contradictory statement, “A necessarily existing God does not exist.” Rather, since “existence is not a predicate that we can assert about God, we merely need to say that, “God does not exist.”