

## The Ontological Argument

**1. Essential properties:** Descartes notes that lots of things are such that, even if they did not exist in reality, there would be certain unchangeable truths about them, just based on the nature of those things. For instance, even if there were no triangles in the real world, it would still be true that triangles have three sides, that the interior angles of triangles add up to 180 degrees, etc. These properties are INSEPARABLE from a triangle, for they are a part of the ESSENCE of BEING a triangle. In short, a triangle has these properties ESSENTIALLY.

So, whether or not they exist in reality, certain concepts are INSEPARABLE from one another. For instance, it would be impossible to imagine a triangle without three sides, or a mountain without a valley, etc.

**2. The Ontological Argument:** God is defined as a “supremely perfect” being. Descartes says that we have an idea of God within us; that is, INNATELY.

God is like the triangle in that, even if there is no God in the real world, certain things are nevertheless TRUE of God; certain concepts are INSEPARABLE from the concept of God. For instance, God is omniscient (all-knowing, since knowledge is a good thing, and God has all good things “supremely” or perfectly). God is omnipotent (all-powerful), and omnibenevolent (morally perfect).

But, wait. Existence, like knowledge, power, and moral goodness, is ALSO a perfection. So, existence is inseparable from the concept of God. It is impossible to conceive of a “supremely perfect” being that does not exist. If we tried, we’d just be imagining some LESS THAN supremely perfect being. This is because, it would be possible to imagine an even MORE perfect being still; namely, one that EXISTS (because not existing is less perfect than existing).

Therefore, God exists.

One more time: Since existence is a perfection (i.e., it is better to exist than not exist), then it must be one of the essential properties of a supremely perfect God. But, an essential property is one that INSEPARABLE from a thing. This means that to conceive of a God that did not exist would be a contradiction.

When we show that “3-sidedness” is an essential property of triangles, this does not prove that triangles EXIST. So, why is God different? Because, we’re not attributing something like “3-sidedness” to God as an essential property. We are attributing EXISTENCE to God as an essential property. This makes God a special case. As such, God is the only being that can be demonstrated to exist merely by thinking about its attributes.

**3. A refutation of skepticism:** Descartes has now refuted external world skepticism. This is because, since a morally perfect God exists, and because such a God would not allow us to be so deceived by our perceptions, this must mean that we can TRUST our perceptions. But, our perceptions tell us that there is an external world. So, there must be one.

**4. The Cartesian Circle:** Descartes' refutation of skepticism is charged with circularity. This objection comes from Antoine Arnauld and Marin Mersenne, contemporaries of Descartes. Mersenne writes,

[In the Meditations, when] you are not yet certain of the existence of God, and you say that you are not certain of anything, and cannot know anything clearly and distinctly until you have achieved clear and certain knowledge of the existence of God. It follows from this that you do not yet [presently, AFTER the Meditations] clearly and distinctly know that you are a thinking thing, since, on your own admission, that knowledge depends on the clear knowledge of an existing God; and this you have not yet proved in the passage where you draw the conclusion that you clearly know what you are. (*Second Set of Objections*)

Arnauld writes,

I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists. But we can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists, we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and evidently is true. (*Fourth Set of Objections*)

Basically, Descartes is being charged with making the following argument:

1. Everything that I clearly and distinctly perceive is true.
2. I clearly and distinctly perceive that existence is inseparable from God.
3. Therefore, God exists.
4. If God exists, He would not allow me to be deceived.
5. Therefore, I can trust that everything I clearly and distinctly perceive is true.

This is circular. Descartes is pulling himself up by his own bootstraps, so to speak. He needs to show that everything that we clearly perceive can be trusted. To do so, he argues that God exists, and that God would not allow us to be deceived. But, how does he argue that God exists? ...By relying on his (dubitable) perceptions.

The above circularity is known as "The Cartesian Circle." It is a problem for skepticism in general, since many anti-skeptical arguments attempt to prove that perception is reliable by appealing to the very thing that is under dispute: namely, perception. But, if clear and distinct perceptions were reliable all along, then why do we need to prove the existence of God?

In order for the argument to not be circular, it would need to look like this:

1. Everything—even things that I clearly and distinctly perceive to be true—is subject to doubt.
2. I clearly and distinctly perceive that existence is inseparable from God.
3. Therefore, God exists.
4. If God existed, He would never allow me to be deceived.
5. Therefore, I can trust that everything I clearly and distinctly perceive is true.

But, here, premise 2 is clearly open to objections (such as those offered by Kant).