The Modal Ontological Argument

Peter van Inwagen details a version of the ontological argument (designed by Alvin Plantinga) which does not treat existence as a predicate. This version makes use of the possible worlds model of modality (i.e., the study of possibility and necessity).

1. Modality: Modality is the study of possibility and necessity. These concepts are intuitive enough.

Possibility: Some things could have been different. For instance, I could have been a truck driver. Britain could have won the Revolutionary War. The Earth could have never formed at all. We say that these things are POSSIBLY the case.

Necessity: On the other hand, some things could NOT have been different. There could not have been square circles. 2+2 could not have equaled something other than 4. We say that these things are NECESSARILY the case.

2. Possible Worlds Semantics: Philosophers have devised a way of modelling truths about possibility and necessity, using a device of a framework of “possible worlds”.

To understand how this modelling device works, first, let's define some terms:

The World: Everything that exists.

Now, "The World" IS a certain way. But, surely The World could have been different. For instance, you might never have been born, stars and planets might not have formed, and so on. In short, there are many possible ways that “The World” could be, or could have been (perhaps infinitely many). When we contemplate one of these “ways The World could be”, we are contemplating a specification of The World.

possible world: A specification of a way The World could have been.

One of the “ways The World could be” is the way things REALLY ARE. That is, one of the “possible” worlds is the way the world IS; i.e., the ACTUAL world.

actual world: The possible world that specifies the way The World actually is.

Possible State Spaces: The idea of there being various specifications of “ways things could have been” is not so foreign. For instance, consider the toss of a single 6-sided die. Imagine that it actually lands on 4.
The picture above represents the way the ACTUAL world—or the way the world ACTUALLY is. But, there are 5 other ways things could be. The pictures below represent 5 other possibilities regarding how things COULD be right now:

Before I rolled the die, ALL SIX of these outcomes were “possible”. As it turns out, the way the die ACTUALLY landed was a “4”. But, I COULD HAVE rolled any of the other 5 numbers. So, propositions like <Possibly, I rolled a six> seem intuitively true; and we can represent these six possible outcomes by picturing each of these six scenarios as six possible WORLDS—one for each of the possible outcomes.

**Possibility and Necessity:** Philosophers typically analyze the notions of possibility and necessity in terms of possible worlds:

1. **Possibility:** <P> is possibly true if and only if <P> is true in AT LEAST ONE possible world.

2. **Necessity:** <P> is necessarily true if and only if <P> is true in EVERY possible world.

For instance, in the first claim, we might sub in <I rolled a 5>. If that is possible, then there is at least one possible world where I rolled a 5—i.e., some “state space” which represents me as rolling a 5.

In the second claim, we might sub in <2+2=4>. If that is necessary, then <2+2=4> is true in every possible world. That is, there is no specification of a “way The World could be” where <2+2=4> is false—at least, not one that correctly describes a way The World could be. Imagine, for instance, all of the different ways the die could have been rolled. While, in each of those possibilities, the DIE comes up differently, <2+2=4> remains true in ALL of those scenarios.
Note About The Arbitrariness of Utterances and Symbols: Now, this is not to say that the vocalization or the utterance of the syllables “Too pluss too ekwalls fore” is necessarily true. For instance, in SOME possibility (possible world), Neanderthals might have applied the vocal utterance “TOO” to the object on the left, and designated it in writing by the symbol “2” on the right:

In that case, the utterance of the syllable “too”, as well as the written symbol “2” would refer to a banana rather than a number. So, what vocalization or written symbol we attach to various concepts is arbitrary. Still there is SOME truth that our arbitrary string of symbols “2+2=4” picks out. And THAT truth is true in all possible worlds.

**Necessary and Contingent Beings:** Now, some terms about two types of beings:

(2a) **contingent being:** A being that could have failed to exist.

In possible worlds speak:

(2a) **contingent being:** A being that exists in some, but not all possible worlds.

Everything around you is a contingent being. You could have failed to exist (your parents might never have conceived you, for instance). That chair could have failed to exist (the chair manufacturer might never have built it). The Earth could have failed to exist (certain matter might never have clumped together to form it).

(2b) **necessary being:** A being that could NOT have failed to exist.

In possible worlds speak:

(2b) **necessary being:** A being that exists in EVERY possible world.

Are there any necessary beings? Perhaps. But, if they exist, they are very special things indeed. For, of all the ordinary things that we interact with every day, all of them are in a sense FRAGILE—that is, they will go out of existence eventually, or they might never have existed at all. But, a necessary being is one that COULD NOT have failed to exist. That is, there is no possible “way The World could be” that does not include it.
Accidental Properties and Essential Properties: Finally, some terms about two types of properties:

(3a) **accidental property**: A property that something has, but COULD have failed to have; i.e., one that is NOT a part of a thing’s nature

In possible worlds speak:

(3a) **accidental property**: A property that a thing has in some, but not all possible worlds.

For instance, you might have the property of “being seated” right now, but surely you could have failed to have this property. After all, this is not an ingredient of WHAT IT IS TO BE you. You might stand up in a minute or two, and continue to exist.

(3b) **essential property**: A property that a thing has, but COULD NOT have failed to have; i.e., one that is a part of a thing’s nature, or WHAT IT IS TO BE that sort of thing.

In possible worlds speak:

(3b) **essential property**: A property that a thing has in every world where it exists.

For instance, triangles are essentially 3-sided. If something is a triangle, it could not have failed to be 3-sided. If we take away one of an individual’s essential properties, that individual will be destroyed. For instance, if we take away a triangle’s three-sidedness, that triangle will cease to exist. Or, what about YOU? Could you have been an alligator? Or, rather, is humanity one of your essential features? Could you have been born of different parents, or is your biological lineage essential to your identity?

Okay. Now we have the tools we’ll need for the argument.

3. **Necessary Existence is a Perfection**: van Inwagen argues that, rather than mere existence, it is NECESSARY existence that is a perfection.

**God has all perfections ESSENTIALLY**: Recall that, in the ontological argument, we defined God as the **perfect being**, and this means that God has all of the “Great-making properties.” But, since this is the definition of God, having all of the great-making properties is what it IS to be God. That is, God has all of the great-making properties *essentially*. 
Now, in possible worlds speak, this just means that God has all of the great-making properties in every world where He exists.

Consider omniscience, for instance. Since it is better to have knowledge rather than none at all, God must have knowledge. Furthermore, since it is better to have ALL knowledge rather than just SOME knowledge, God has ALL knowledge; i.e., He is omniscient. But, since this is part of the definition of God, part of WHAT IT IS to be God is to be all-knowing. So, we say, omniscience is an ESSENTIAL property of God.

In Kantian speak, we simply mean that: IF God exists, THEN He is omniscient. Or, in possible worlds speak: God is omniscient in every possible world where He exists.

Necessary Existence: Now, regarding existence, ask, which is better: To exist contingently or necessarily? That is, is the greatest conceivable being one that just happens to exist as a matter of circumstance, as a contingent being, or is He rather one that could NOT have failed to exist; i.e., as a necessary being? Clearly the latter, van Inwagen says. That is, it is necessary existence is one of the “great-making” properties, or “perfections”. Therefore, the greatest conceivable being has necessary existence essentially.

In Kantian speak: If God exists, then He is a necessary being.

In possible worlds speak: God is a necessary being in every possible world where He exists.

4. The Argument: Now ask, isn’t it at least POSSIBLE that the greatest conceivable being exists? Surely it is, right? Even the most hardcore atheist typically assigns some non-zero probability to God’s existence. Claiming that there is a ZERO chance that God exists is claiming that it is just as firm a fact about reality that God does not exist as it is that things like square circles and married bachelors do not exist. Whereas square circles are not possible, surely God IS possible (if only remotely so).

Remember that, if something is possible, then (in possible worlds speak) it exists in at least one possible world. We might picture worlds like this, where world 1 is the actual world, and “God” represents God existing in one of the (non-actual) possible worlds:
But, remember, if God has necessary existence essentially, then, **God is a necessary being in every possible world where He exists.** This means that, in world 4, God is a necessary being. But, to be a necessary being is to be a being that exists in every possible world. So, God exists in every possible world. Like this:

![Diagram of worlds](image)

But, the actual world—world 1—is ONE OF the possible worlds. In short, if God exists in all of the possible worlds, then He exists in the actual world.

Conclusion: **Therefore, God exists in the actual world.**

[Note: Now, someone might object and claim: “If God is possible, and so exists at world 4, then God is only a necessary being AT WORLD 4—that is, God only exists in all of the worlds that are possible AT WORLD 4, and perhaps the actual world is just not a world that is possible at world 4.” But, this is not typically how we view the nature of possibility. Rather, we typically thing that, if world 4 is possible at the actual world, then (vice versa) the actual world is also possible at world 4. Note that this requires an assumption about the nature of possibility; namely, it assumes that whatever is possible at SOME world is the same at any OTHER world. This principle is called symmetry of possibility. Denying symmetry would be like saying, “In the actual world, I rolled a 4, but I could have rolled a 5. So, rolling a 5 is one of the possibilities that could have happened. But, if I had rolled a 5, it would NOT have been true that I could have rolled a 4. Rolling a 4 would not have been one of the possibilities.” But, that is absurd.]

Thus, here we seem to have a proof of God’s existence that escapes Kant’s criticism. Namely, this MODAL version of the ontological argument does not treat existence as a predicate (though it does treat NECESSARY existence as a predicate).
The Modal Ontological Argument may be stated as follows:

1. God, if He exists, is the greatest conceivable being.
2. The greatest conceivable being is one which has all of the great-making characteristics essentially.
3. Necessary existence is a great-making characteristic.
4. So, God, if He exists, is a necessary being.
5. It is possible that the greatest conceivable being exists.
6. By definition, a being that is possible exists in at least one possible world.
7. But, any necessary being that exists in at least one possible world is one that exists in EVERY possible world.
8. Symmetry: For any world, w, if w is one of the possible worlds at the actual world, then the actual world is one of the possible worlds at w.
9. So, anything that exists in every possible world (i.e., exists necessarily) at some possible world, w, must also exist in the actual world.
10. Therefore, God exists in the actual world.

4. Objection: The only premises up for debate are premises 1, 2, 3, 5, and 8. But, 1 and 2 are just the stipulated definition of a certain concept (the concept of God). Premise 3 is debatable, but it really DOES seem that the a being would be greater, or more perfect, if it could not have failed to exist. Premise 8 is a very plausible premise about the nature of possibility—and one which the majority of philosophers of modality endorse.

So, by far the most controversial premise is premise 5. Here is an objection to that premise:

Knowno: Define the concept of a being called a “knowno” as follows:

Knowno: A being who knows that God does not exist.

Is a knowno possible? It seems so. Or at least, the concept contains no internal inconsistency of the sort that the concept of “a square circle” does. But, if a knowno is possible, then a known exists in at least one possible world. But, then, in THAT world, God does not exist—for one cannot KNOW something if it is false. In that case, a necessary being with all of the perfections does NOT exist (though there might be one or more very wonderful and powerful CONTINGENT beings).

In short, the claims <A knowno is possible> and <God is possible> are incompatible. They cannot BOTH be true. That is, if God exists (defined as a necessary being) then a knowno is impossible. On the other hand, if a knowno is possible, then God does not exist. But, then, how do we decide between these two claims? We cannot.
Conceivability vs. Possibility: There is a big debate among philosophers. The question is, If I can imagine something, does this mean that it could have happened? That is, Does conceivability entail possibility?

(1) No: It seems that I can conceive of (i.e., imagine) van Inwagen’s God. It also seems that I can conceive of a know-no. But, they can’t BOTH be possible. One of them (or both) must be impossible. Therefore, conceivability does not entail possibility. So, the fact that we can imagine a God does not mean He is possible.

(2) Yes: Conceivability DOES entail possibility. It’s just that, people are MISTAKEN that they can conceive of van Inwagen’s God. Think about it: Can you REALLY imagine such a God, where one of His properties is necessary existence? David Chalmers says, No, you can’t. In fact, NO ONE could. The very idea is incoherent. So, even though everything you can imagine IS possible—i.e., it is a “way the world could be”—God is not among the things we are capable of imagining.