

The Modal Ontological Argument

Peter van Inwagen details an updated version of Anselm's ontological argument—one which makes use of possible worlds in order to prove that God exists.

1. Possible Worlds Semantics: Recall that modality is the study of possibility and necessity. Here are some of the terms we laid out in the previous lecture:

The World: Everything that exists (i.e., that huge place where you and I live).

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

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

On a possible worlds analysis of modality, our modal concepts are explained as follows:

possibility: \langle Possibly, P \rangle is true if and only if \langle P \rangle is true in at least one possible world.

necessity: \langle Necessarily, P \rangle is true if and only if \langle P \rangle is true in all possible worlds.

For instance, $\langle 2+2=4 \rangle$ is true in every possible world, and \langle Chad is a truck driver \rangle is true in at least one possible world. Now for some additional terms:

Necessary and Contingent Beings: There seem to be two types of beings in the world:

(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). But there might be:

(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 modally FRAGILE—that is, they might never have existed at all. (Not to mention, they'll one day CEASE to exist.) 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. Some common candidates for necessary beings include abstract entities like numbers and propositions (could ‘two’ have failed to exist?), and God.

Accidental Properties and Essential Properties: Objects have 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 in which it exists.

For instance, triangles are essentially 3-sided. It is impossible for a triangle to exist and NOT be 3-sided. If we were to take away one of an individual’s essential properties, that individual would 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 had different parents, or is your biological lineage essential to your identity? (*We’ll ask this question later in the semester.*)

2. The '3-O' God: The standard Western, monotheistic understanding of God has been that of a maximally **perfect being**. So, when asking what God's attributes would be (if He existed), we simply ask: Would it be better to have this attribute? If the answer is 'yes', then the perfect being must have it. (For how can a being be perfect if it lacks a good-making property?) For example, typically, at least the following are included:

- (1) **Knowledge**; it is better to know some things, rather than not know anything.
- (2) **Power**; it is better to have the power to do things, rather than no power at all.
- (3) **Moral goodness**; it is better to be morally upright, rather than evil.

But, what's more: Imagine having some limited amount of knowledge, or power, or moral goodness. Surely, it would be even BETTER to have MORE of those things. So, not only would the perfect being have these things, but it would have them MAXIMALLY. So, we say that God (if He exists) is ALL-knowing (**omniscient**), ALL-powerful (**omnipotent**) and ALL-good, or morally PERFECT (i.e., **omnibenevolent**). These are the "three O's".

3. Necessary Existence is a Perfection: Many philosophers have added further attributes to the three above; for instance, Aquinas added that God must also be infinite, omnipresent, eternal, and immutable. Peter van Inwagen adds another item to this list: Necessary existence. In short, the perfect being must be a **necessary being** rather than a contingent one. Therefore, God exists. Huh? Let's see how he arrives at this conclusion.

God has all perfections ESSENTIALLY: The being under consideration is DEFINED as the maximally perfect being. As such, having all of the perfections is what it IS to be God. In short, 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 to the maximum degree in every world where He exists.**

Consider omniscience, for instance. Since it is better to have some 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 possible worlds speak: **God is omniscient in every possible world where He exists.**

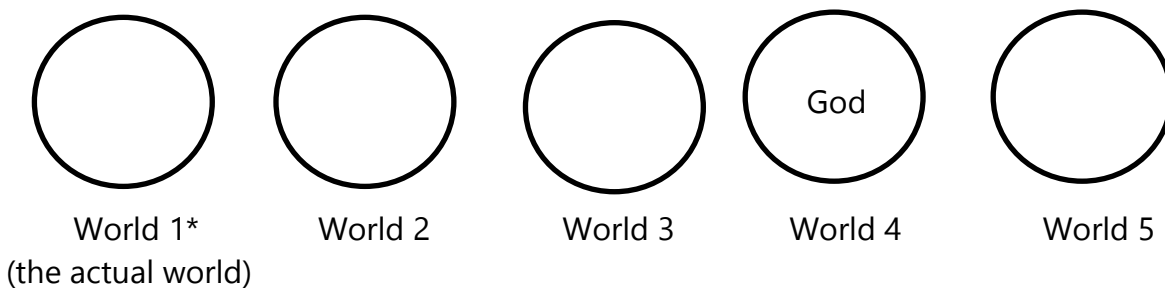
Necessary Existence: But now, regarding existence, ask, which is better: To exist contingently or necessarily? That is, is the perfect being one that just happens to exist as a matter of circumstance, as a **contingent being**, or is He rather one that could NOT have failed to exist; i.e., as a **necessary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

Therefore, the perfect being has necessary existence essentially. In possible worlds speak: **God is a necessary being in every possible world where He exists.**

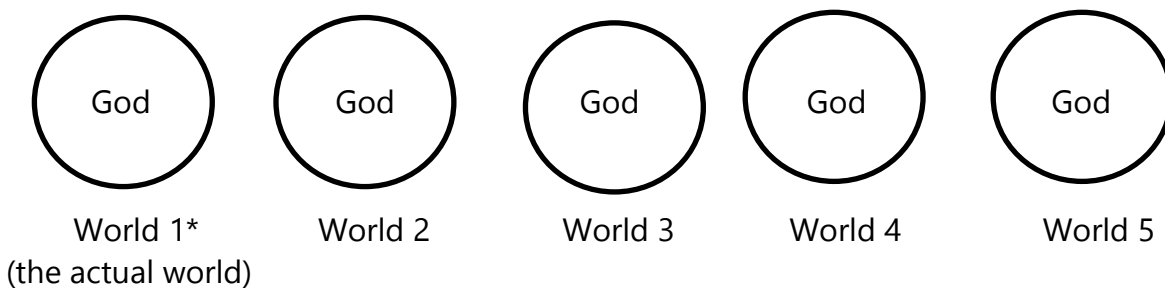
4. The Argument: Now ask, isn't it at least POSSIBLE that a perfect being exists? Surely it is, right? Even the most hardcore atheist typically assigns some non-zero probability to God's existence. Claiming that there is a ZERO chance that God exists is claiming that it is just as firm a fact about reality 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).

At the very least, unlike square circles and married bachelors, surely the concept of God is not internally inconsistent! So, we say that **it is possible that God exists.**

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, if a necessary being exists in ANY possible world, then it exists in EVERY possible world. This is what it MEANS to be a necessary being. Like this:



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.**

The Modal Ontological Argument may be stated as follows:

1. Define 'God' as a perfect being; i.e., a being which has all of the great-making characteristics maximally, and essentially.
2. Necessary existence is a great-making characteristic.
3. Therefore, God, if He exists, is a necessary being.
4. It is possible that a perfect being exists; i.e., a maximally perfect (and therefore necessary) being exists in at least one possible world.
5. By definition, any necessary being that exists in at least one possible world is one that exists in EVERY possible world.
6. 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 think 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.*

So, there IS one more implicit premise in the background here. Namely,

0. *Modal Symmetry: For any world, w, if w is possible at the actual world, then the actual world is possible at w.]*

4. Objection: Premises 1 and 5 are just definitions. 3 and 6 are conclusions that follow from the other premises. So, if we want to avoid the conclusion, we must reject either of premises 2 or 4 (*or perhaps 0?*). Premise 2 is debatable, but it really DOES seem that a being would be greater, or more perfect, if it could not have failed to exist. Right? So, let's look at an objection to P4. First, define something 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 knowno 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. (*'Knowledge' is typically understood as being, at the very least, a 'justified TRUE belief'.*) 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). For, if the being under consideration fails to exist in even ONE world, it is by definition contingent, and not necessary.

To reiterate: If a knowno is possible, then God's existence is impossible. For in that case, there is at least one possible world where someone knows that there is no God, which entails there is at least one world where God does not exist. But, this in turn entails that God—a necessary being—does not exist in ANY possible world.

On the other hand, if God's existence is possible, then the existence of a knowno is impossible. For, in this case, God—a necessary being—exists in every possible world, and this is incompatible with the existence of someone who knows that there is no God; i.e., God's existence entails that there are no knowno's in any of the possible worlds.

In short, the claims <A knowno is possible> and <God is possible> are incompatible. They cannot BOTH be true. So, then, how do we decide between these two claims? Van Inwagen concludes that 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 both a perfect being and a knowno are conceivable. For, neither of these concepts seem to be internally inconsistent, entailing a contradiction. But, as we have seen, they can't BOTH be possible. (At least) One of them must be impossible. Therefore, conceivability cannot entail possibility. In short, the mere fact that we can imagine or conceive of a perfect being does not entail that a perfect being is metaphysically possible.
- (2) **Yes?** On the other hand, we might try to maintain that conceivability DOES entail possibility. It's just that, people are MISTAKEN when they think that they can conceive of a perfect being (or a knowno). (This is David Chalmers' view, for instance.) Perhaps we can imagine certain elements of the description (e.g., 'being' and 'necessity') alongside one another. But that's not saying much. We can ALSO imagine the properties of 'squareness' and 'circularity' alongside one another. This doesn't entail that square circles are possible! Perhaps we should say that everything an "ideal conceiver" can conceive is metaphysically possible.