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Necessary Being

The Ontological Argument

Late in the eleventh century, a theologian named Anselm (later the archbishop of Canterbury) wrote a book called the *Proslogion*, which was largely devoted to the exposition of a certain argument for the existence of God. The interesting thing about this argument was that it claimed to prove the impossibility of the non-existence of God, owing to the fact that any assertion of the non-existence of God must be self-contradictory. This is a very strong claim indeed. To see how strong it is, imagine an atheist named Athelred who is fond of proclaiming to all and sundry that there is no God. If Anselm is right, then every time Athelred issues this proclamation, he contradicts himself; he contradicts himself in just as strong a sense as he would have if he had said, "There is no God . . . *and* there is a God" or "My house is rectangular and has six sides." Anselm did not, of course, contend that the contradiction involved in saying there was no God was quite as blatant as the contradictions involved in these two statements. If the contradiction were that easy to spot, no argument would be needed to display it. But he did contend that this contradiction was a contradiction in the same strong sense as the contradictions involved in these two statements.

It should be obvious that if Anselm is right in his claims for his argument, then this argument provides an answer for the question, Why should there be anything at all? For if the thesis that there is no God is self-contradictory, it cannot be true. And if there were nothing at all, that thesis would be true. If Anselm's argument shows that there has to be a God, then, it shows that there cannot be nothing. Granted, it does not show that there has to be a physical universe like the one we observe around us, and thus it does not answer the question why there should be

such a universe. But the question, Why should there be anything at all? is not the same question as, Why should there be a physical universe? The conclusion of Saint Anselm's argument, moreover, is not irrelevant to the latter question, since, if there is a God, this God no doubt has a great deal to do with the fact that there is a physical universe.

Anselm's argument was almost immediately attacked by one Gaunilo, a Benedictine monk, and theologians and philosophers have been attacking it ever since. About two hundred years after Anselm's time, in the late thirteenth century, the argument was declared invalid by Saint Thomas Aquinas, and almost everyone has followed his lead in declaring it invalid. Indeed, philosophers and theologians have not only mostly regarded the argument as invalid but have also mostly regarded it as obviously, scandalously, and embarrassingly invalid. This judgment was nicely summed up by the nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who called the argument a "charming joke."

And what is this notorious argument? Actually, rather than examine Anselm's argument, we shall render our task considerably easier if we look at an argument devised about five hundred years later—at roughly the time the Pilgrims were landing at Plymouth Rock—by René Descartes. Descartes's argument (which is much easier to state and to follow than Anselm's) and Anselm's argument are generally classified as different "versions" of the same argument: each is customarily described as a version of "the ontological argument."[1]

Descartes's argument goes something like this:

If we look within ourselves, we find that we possess the concept of a supremely perfect being. [Descartes identifies the concept of a supremely perfect being— from now on we shall say simply 'perfect being'—with the concept of God and therefore regards his argument as a proof of the existence of God. But since the existence of God is not our primary concern—our primary concern is the question why there is anything at all—let us ignore this aspect of Descartes's argument. We shall simply avoid the word 'God' and the question whether the concept of a perfect being is the same as the concept we customarily associate with this word.] That is, we find the concept of a being that is perfect in every respect or, as we may say, possesses all perfections. But existence itself is a perfection, since a thing is better if it exists than if it does not exist. But then a perfect being has to *exist*; it simply wouldn't be perfect if it didn't. Existence is a part of the *concept* of a perfect being; anyone who denied that a perfect being had the property existence would be like someone who denied that a triangle had the property three-sidedness. Just as three-sidedness is a part of the concept of a triangle—the mind cannot conceive of triangularity without also conceiv-

ing of three-sidedness—existence is a part of the concept of a perfect being: the mind cannot conceive of perfection without also conceiving of existence.

This argument of Descartes's, if it is correct, provides us with an answer to the question, Why is there anything at all? If Descartes is right, it is impossible for there to be no perfect being, just as it is impossible for there to be a triangle that does not have three sides. And if it is impossible for there to be no perfect being, it is impossible for there to be nothing at all, since the existence of a perfect being is the existence of something.

The faults that have been ascribed to the ontological argument are many and various. One might, for example, raise the question why existence should be regarded as a "perfection." What's so wonderful about existence? one might wonder. After all, many people seem to think that they can improve their lot by suicide— that is, by electing non-existence. But it is generally conceded, or was until rather recently, that one of the faults of the ontological argument is so grievous that it is the only one the critic of the argument need mention. This fault, or alleged fault, is best known in the formulation of Immanuel Kant. Kant's diagnosis of the argument's chief fault can be stated as follows:

> Whatever else a perfection may be, any perfection must be a property—or feature, attribute, or characteristic—of things. But existence is not a property of things. 'Existence' is not one item in the list of the properties of (for example) the Taj Mahal, an item that occurs in addition to such items as 'white', 'famous for its beauty', 'located in the city of Agra', and so on. Rather, when we specify certain properties and say that something having those properties *exists*, all we are saying is that something has those properties. Suppose, for example, that the following are the properties everyone agrees the poet Homer had if he existed: he was a blind, male Ionian poet of the eighth century B.C. who wrote all or most of the epic poems we know as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Call this set of properties H. Now suppose there are two classical scholars, one of whom thinks Homer existed and the other of whom thinks Homer was legendary (the two great epics that are supposedly his compositions having been pieced together over a long period from the work of many anonymous poets). It would be wrong—in fact, it would be absurd—to describe the disagreement of these two scholars by saying that one thought that someone had the set of properties H and, in addition, the property "existence," while the other agreed that someone had the set of properties H and went on to assert that this person lacked the property "existence." No, it's just that one scholar thinks that someone had all (or at least most of) the properties in the set H and that the other thinks that no

one has ever had all of (or even very many of) them. This case illustrates the sense in which existence is not a property.[2] But if existence is not a property, it cannot be an ingredient of a concept. A concept is really no more than a list of properties, the properties a thing must have to fall under that concept. For example, the concept of a dog is just the list of properties a thing must have to count as a dog. (The list of properties enumerated a few sentences back spells out the concept associated with the description 'the poet Homer'.) What Descartes has done is to treat existence as if it were the kind of thing that could be an ingredient of a concept. If one does this, however, one opens the door to all sorts of evident absurdities. Here is an example of such an absurdity. Define an 'egmount' as an existent mountain made entirely of gold: to be an egmount, a thing must (a) be a mountain, (b) be made entirely of gold, and (c) exist. It is obviously a part of the concept of an egmount that an egmount *exists*: it says so on the label, as it were. But, as everyone knows, there are no egmounts. The ontological argument is this same absurdity in a (thinly) disguised form.

Although this refutation of the ontological argument was "standard" for almost two hundred years, it cannot be regarded as satisfactory.[3] The problem is not so much that Kant says anything that is definitely wrong. The difficulty is rather as follows. It is possible to construct an argument very similar to Descartes's argument—an argument that just obviously ought to be invalid for the same reason as Descartes's argument—that does not treat existence as a property. And it is possible to point to a rather obvious defect that is shared by the two arguments. It will be obvious when we have done this that the shared defect is what is really or fundamentally wrong with Descartes's argument and that the Kantian refutation of the argument is at best a point about a peripheral fault in the argument.

Let us consider the idea of *necessary existence*. A thing has necessary existence if it would have existed no matter what, if it would have existed under any possible circumstances. An equivalent definition is this: A thing has necessary existence if its non-existence would have been impossible. And by 'impossible' we mean *absolutely* impossible: if *x* is a necessary being, then the non-existence of *x* is as impossible as a round square or a liquid wine bottle. (I hope no one is going to be tiresome and tell me that ordinary room-temperature glass *is* a liquid.) It is obvious that you and I do not possess necessary existence: we should never have existed if our respective sets of parents happened never to have met, and that is certainly a "possible circumstance." Moreover, it is clear that the same point applies to Julius Caesar and the Taj Mahal. As to the latter, it would not have existed if the beloved wife of a certain Mogul emperor had not died young. And even an object that has, by everyday standards, a really impressive grip on existence—

Mount Everest, say—lacks necessary existence: Mount Everest would not have existed if the Indian subcontinent had not drifted into contact with Asia. The very sun would not have existed if certain random density distributions in the prestellar nebulae had not led to the gravitational contraction of a particular grouping of hydrogen atoms into a radiating body. For all we know, even the physical universe might not have existed—either because whatever it was that caused the universe to come into existence ten or fifteen thousand million years ago failed to produce any universe at all or because this cause produced some other universe.

These reflections make it clear that necessary existence is a property, in just the sense that mere existence is not (if Kant is right) a property. It is true that it may not be a *possible* property. Perhaps it is a property like *being both round and square* or *being a liquid wine bottle* or *being a prime number larger than all other prime numbers*, a property nothing could possibly have. (It is certainly hard to think of an uncontroversial example of a necessarily existent thing.) The important point for present purposes is that necessary existence cannot be said not to be a property at all—not, at any rate, because of considerations of the sort Kant adduces to show that existence is not a property. It seems clear that whatever may be the case with mere existence, necessary existence *can* be an ingredient in a concept. In fact, many philosophers and theologians have held that necessary existence is a part of the concept of God—and other philosophers and theologians have denied that necessary existence is a part of the concept of God. Now let us consider an argument that is like Descartes's ontological argument, except that 'necessary existence' is substituted for 'existence' throughout. The argument would look something like this:

- A perfect being has all perfections.
- Necessary existence is a perfection.
  Hence, A perfect being has necessary existence.
- Whatever has necessary existence has existence.
  Hence, A perfect being has existence.
- Whatever has existence exists.
  Hence, A perfect being exists.

It is interesting to note that in one way, at least, this argument is more plausible than Descartes's actual argument. We saw above that it is not quite clear why one should assume that existence is a perfection. But there seems to be no such problem about necessary existence. A being (like you and me and Caesar and the Taj Mahal and the sun and perhaps even the physical universe) that lacks necessary existence will typically depend for its own existence on the prior operations of

other beings, and probably these operations will involve a large element of sheer *chance*. But a necessarily existent being is not dependent on the vagaries of chance, for its existence is absolutely inevitable. To exist necessarily is, therefore, a most impressive accomplishment—the same can hardly be said for existence: the lowliest worm and the most ephemeral subnuclear resonance manage to *exist*—and any necessarily existent thing is a most impressive being. Many philosophers and theologians have, for this very reason, wanted to include necessary existence among the attributes of God. It therefore seems very plausible to hold that necessary existence should be an item in any list of "perfections."

Be that as it may, the new version of Descartes's argument is obviously invalid, and it looks very much as if it were invalid for much the same reason as the original version. Recall the example of the egmount. We can easily construct a similar example that is addressed to the revised argument. Let us define a "negmount" as a *necessarily* existent golden mountain. If the revised version of the argument is valid, then (or so it would seem) so is the following argument. Let us call the three properties that occur in this definition (necessary existence, being made of gold, and being a mountain) the "negmontanic properties." We may now argue:

- A negmount has all negmontanic properties.
- Necessary existence is a negmontanic property.
  Hence, A negmount has necessary existence.
- Whatever has necessary existence has existence.
  Hence, A negmount has existence.
- Whatever has existence exists.
  Hence, A negmount exists.

But the conclusion of this argument is obviously false. There is no negmount. In fact, it can plausibly be argued that not only is the conclusion false but it couldn't *possibly* be true. A mountain, whatever it may be made of, is a physical object, and it is very hard to see how a physical object could possibly be necessarily existent. Even if necessary existence is possible for some sorts of things, a physical object is composed of parts, and it would not have existed if those parts had never come together. But there is no need to argue about this subtle point. The same conclusion can be reached in a way that allows no evasion. Let a "nousquare" be a necessarily existent round square. If the above argument is valid, an exactly parallel argument proves the existence of a necessarily existent round square—and hence of a round square.

It is clear, therefore, that the above argument is *not* valid. But where is its logical defect to be found? Not where Kant says the defect in Descartes's argument is

to be found, for the argument does not assume that existence can figure as an in-gredient of a concept, and Kant has provided no reason to think that necessary existence cannot figure as an ingredient of a concept. (The concept of a negmount seems to me to be a perfectly good example of a concept, albeit it is not a very use-ful concept.) What is wrong with the negmount argument is very simple: its first premise—'A negmount has all negmontanic properties'—is ambiguous. That is, it could have either of two meanings:

- Anything that is a negmount has all the negmontanic properties.
- There is a negmount that has all the negmontanic properties.

(The former of these statements is true whether or not there are negmounts. It simply says that a thing does not count as a negmount unless it has all the neg-montanic properties. The latter statement, of course, cannot be true unless there is a negmount.) The ambiguity is rooted in two quite different functions performed by the indefinite article. To say "A public official is sworn to uphold the law" is to say that anyone who is a public official is sworn to uphold the law, an assertion that could, in principle, be true even if there were no public officials. To say "A public official was arraigned in Superior Court today" is to say that there is a pub-lic official who was arraigned in Superior Court today. (Descartes's original state-ment of his argument was in Latin, which has no word corresponding to 'a' and 'an'. But there is a corresponding ambiguity in the Latin constructions he used.)

Because the first premise of the negmount argument is ambiguous, "it" is not really one argument at all, but two arguments jumbled together. When we disen-tangle the jumble, we find that one of these arguments begins with the premise that anything that is a negmount has all the negmontanic properties, and pro-ceeds to the conclusion that anything that is a negmount exists; the other begins with the premise that there is a negmount having all the negmontanic properties, and proceeds to the conclusion that there is a negmount that exists. Neither of these two arguments should convince anyone that there is a negmount.

As to the first argument, its premise is clearly true, but its conclusion—any-thing that is a negmount exists—is true whether or not any negmounts exist (just as 'Anything that is a unicorn has a single horn' is true whether or not there are any unicorns). As to the second argument, its conclusion obviously implies that there is a negmount (an existent negmount, if that adds anything to the assertion that there is a negmount), but this was asserted by the premise—there is a neg-mount that has all the negmontanic properties—and it is no news that one can derive the conclusion that there is a negmount from the premise that there is a negmount. Such plausibility as the original negmount argument had derived from

the fact that, because the two arguments were run together, it looked as if we had an argument with the impressive conclusion of the second argument and the innocent premise of the first.

All these points apply, with very minor adjustments, both to Descartes's ontological argument and to the revised version of his argument (the one that appeals to the notion of necessary existence rather than to simple existence). Let us consider the revised version. When the first premise of the argument is properly disambiguated, we have two arguments:

- Anything that is a perfect being has all perfections.
- Necessary existence is a perfection.
  Hence, Anything that is a perfect being has necessary existence.
- Whatever has necessary existence has existence.
  Hence, Anything that is a perfect being has existence.
- Whatever has existence exists.
  Hence, Anything that is a perfect being exists.

- There is a perfect being that has all perfections.
- Necessary existence is a perfection.
  Hence, There is a perfect being that has necessary existence.
- Whatever has necessary existence has existence.
  Hence, There is a perfect being that has existence.
- Whatever has existence exists.
  Hence, There is a perfect being that exists.

The first of these two arguments proceeds from an obvious premise to a trivial conclusion. The second argument has a non-trivial conclusion, but this conclusion is, essentially, its first premise. Those who grant the first premise of the second argument hardly need the other premises; they can make do with a much simpler argument:

- There is a perfect being that has all perfections.
  Hence, There is a perfect being.

But this argument has—to say the least—little persuasive force.

It should be clear that the ambiguity we have found in the revised version of Descartes's argument is present in the original. Such persuasive force as the original argument has is due simply to its being a jumble of two arguments; one of the two has an obviously true premise and the other has an interesting conclusion.

Descartes's attempt to prove the impossibility of the non-existence of a perfect being is therefore a failure and so can be of no help to us in our inquiry into why there should be anything at all. (Without going into the details of the matter, I will record my conviction that the earlier argument of Saint Anselm is also a failure.) This does not mean, however, that the ontological argument is of no relevance to our inquiry, for it may be that there are other versions of the ontological argument, versions not guilty of the fallacy of ambiguity that was the downfall of Descartes's argument. And recent researches in the philosophy of modality (the philosophy of necessity and possibility) do indeed seem to have produced a "new" ontological argument, an argument that does not exploit a hidden ambiguity or commit any other logical fallacy.

This argument, which is usually called the modal ontological argument, is best presented in terms of "possible worlds." This notion may be explained as follows. We have said the "the World" is the totality of everything there is. But it is obvious that the World might be different—indeed that it might always have been different—from the way it is. There might be fewer cats or more dogs. There might never have been any cats or dogs at all (if, say, evolution had taken a slightly different course). Napoleon might have lost the battle of Austerlitz or won the battle of Waterloo. As we saw in our discussion of the notion of a necessary being, the sun—perhaps even the physical universe—might never have existed. A list of the ways things might have been different (which is the same as a list of the ways the World might have been different) could go on and on without any discernible limit. By a possible world, we mean simply a complete specification of a way the World might have been, a specification so precise and definite that it settles every single detail, no matter how minor.[4] If we assume that everything there is or could be is subject to the flow of time—almost certainly not a wise assumption—we could say that a possible world is a complete history-and-future that the World might have (or might have had), one whose completeness extends to every detail.

In order to make full use of the concept of a possible world, we need the idea of *truth in* a given possible world and we need the idea of *existence in* a given possible world. While various technical accounts of these ideas are available, we shall be content with an intuitive or impressionistic account of them. A few examples should suffice. If in a given world *x* there are no dogs—if that is how *x* specifies things: that there are no dogs—then in *x* dogs do not exist, and it is true in *x* that there are no dogs, and the proposition (assertion, statement, thesis) that there are no dogs is true in *x*. If in a given possible world *y* Napoleon won the battle of Waterloo, then it is true in *y* that Napoleon won the battle of Waterloo, and the proposition that Napoleon won the battle of Waterloo is true in *y*. And, of course, Napoleon must *exist* in *y*, for one cannot win a battle if one does not exist. But

there are possible worlds in which Napoleon was never born (or even conceived) and in those possible worlds he does not exist.

Once we have the notion of a proposition's being true in a possible world, we can say what it is for a proposition to be *possibly true* and for a proposition to be *necessarily true*. A proposition is possibly true if it is true in *at least one* possible world, and necessarily true if it is true in *all* possible worlds.

The possible world that specifies the way the World really *is* is called *the actual world*. A more formal definition is this: a possible world *w* is the actual world just in the case that something is true in *w* if and only if it is—without qualification—true.[5] It is important not to confuse the actual world with the World. The actual world is a mere specification, a description of a way for things to be. It has only the kind of abstract reality that belongs to a story or a scenario or a computer program. The World, however, is not a description of a way for things to be: it is, so to speak, the things themselves. If it is an individual thing, it has you and me and every other individual thing as parts. If it is not an individual thing but a mere collection, it is at least the collection of all individual things. It is the features of the World that make one of the possible worlds the one that is actual, just as it is the geographical features of the earth that make some maps accurate or correct and other maps inaccurate or incorrect. It is the features of the World that confer on exactly one among all the ways things could be the status "the way things *are*."

It is not necessary to make use of the concept of a possible world in presenting the "modal ontological argument," but it is advisable, since the English grammatical constructions used in formulating modal reasoning are sources of much ambiguity, and this ambiguity can cause logically invalid arguments to look as if they were valid.[6] The easiest and most elegant way to avoid these ambiguities is to carry on discussions that involve modal reasoning in terms of possible worlds.

In order to state the modal ontological argument, we need two notions: the notion of a necessary being and the notion of something's having a property (feature, attribute, characteristic) essentially.

We have already met the notion of necessary existence in our discussion of Descartes's ontological argument. A necessary *being* is simply a being that possesses necessary existence. But we may define this concept very simply in terms of the concept of a possible world: a necessary being is a being that exists in all possible worlds (and necessary existence is the property of existing in all possible worlds). Beings that are not necessary are called *contingent*. That is, a contingent being is simply a being that exists in some but not all possible worlds. You and I and every object of our experience are, no doubt, contingent beings. You, for example, do not exist in any possible world in which you were never conceived (and this would certainly seem to be a possible state of affairs).

The concept of the essential possession of a property is this: a thing has a property essentially just in the case that that property is a part of the thing's nature, so inextricably entwined with the thing's being that it could not exist if it did not have that property. We may explain this notion in possible-worlds language as follows: for a thing *x* to have a given property essentially is for *x* to have that property in every possible world in which *x* exists. It should be emphasized that this is a definition, not a recipe. It tells us what the essential possession of a property is, but it does not give us a method for determining whether a particular property is in fact possessed essentially by a particular thing.

Consider you, for example, and the property humanity, or being human. Obviously you *have* this property—you *are* human—, but do you have it *essentially*? Is being human so "inextricably entwined with your being" that you could not exist without being human? Are you a human being in every possible world in which you so much as exist? This is a metaphysical question, and a very controversial one. Philosophers disagree about how to answer this question because they disagree about what you *are*, and, as a consequence, they disagree about what you *could have been*. But for our present purposes it will not be necessary to have any uncontroversial examples of the essential possession of a property (which is fortunate, for few if any examples of "essential properties" are uncontroversial); it is enough that we understand what is meant by the essential possession of a property. It will sometimes be useful to have a term to oppose to 'essentially' in discussions of the possession of a property by a thing. If a thing has a property but does not have it essentially, we say it has that property *accidentally*.

The ontological argument is, or claims to be, a proof of the existence of a perfect being. And what is a perfect being? A perfect being, Descartes tells us, is a being possessing all perfections. But now let us raise a question this formula does not answer. When we say that a perfect being possesses all perfections, do we mean that a perfect being possesses all perfections essentially or could a being be a perfect being if, although it indeed had every perfection, it had some or all of its perfections only accidentally? In order to see more clearly what is at stake in this question, let us look at a particular perfection. We may not be sure exactly which properties are perfections, but it seems reasonable to suppose that wisdom is among them. If this is not right, however, it will make no difference to our argument, which—with one exception, as we shall see—does not make any assumptions about which properties are perfections. We choose wisdom only to have something to use as a reasonably plausible example of a perfection.

Let us consider two (equally) wise beings, one of which has its wisdom essentially and the other of which has its wisdom only accidentally. This means that while one of the two beings would have been wise no matter what (as long as it

managed to exist at all), the other might have been unwise. The nature of the former being is incompatible with unwisdom, and the nature of the latter is compatible both with wisdom and with unwisdom. Although it is a matter of necessity that the former is wise, given that it exists, it is, speaking metaphysically, an *accident* that the latter is wise. The latter's wisdom is, so to speak, a gift of the circumstances in which that being happens to exist, and that gift would not have been conferred by other sets of circumstances, circumstances in which that being might have found itself. (This is certainly the way most of us look at the wisdom of human beings. If Alice is, as we all agree, wise, we do not suppose that it follows from the undisputed fact of her wisdom that she would have been wise if she had been raised among people who provided her with no examples of wisdom or if she had been raised in grinding poverty that left her with no leisure for reflection. And we should probably agree that she would definitely *not* have been wise if she had, as a small child, suffered brain damage that had left her with severely diminished mental capacities.)

Now—we continue to assume for the sake of the illustration that wisdom is a perfection—which of our two beings is a better candidate for the office "perfect being"? The example seems to offer fairly strong support for the thesis that the essential possession of a perfection brings a being closer to the status "perfect" than does the merely accidental possession of that same perfection. Let us therefore say that a perfect being is a being that possesses all perfections and, moreover, possesses those perfections essentially and not merely accidentally—of its own nature, and not merely as a gift of circumstance.

And what properties are perfections? As I said, we shall make only one assumption about this. We shall assume that *necessary existence* is a perfection. And this does not seem to be an implausible assumption. As we said in our discussion of Descartes's ontological argument, if a being exists necessarily, its existence does not depend on the vagaries of chance, for its existence is absolutely inevitable. Is not "just happening to exist" a disqualification for the office "perfect being"? Must we not, therefore, count necessary existence as a perfection?

That necessary existence is a perfection is one of the premises of the modal ontological argument. The argument has only one other premise: that a perfect being is possible—or, equivalently, that a perfect being is not *impossible*. And such a premise must in some sense be required by any argument for the existence of anything, since an impossible being—a round square, say, or a liquid wine bottle—by definition cannot exist. Here, then, is the modal ontological argument:

- A perfect being (that is, a being that possesses all perfections essentially) is not impossible.

- Necessary existence is a perfection.[7]
  Hence, A perfect being exists.

Our first task will be to show that this argument is logically valid—that is, that its conclusion (that a perfect being exists) follows logically if its two premises are granted. Our next task will be to see whether the two premises *should* be granted. And this will come down to the task of seeing whether the first premise (that a perfect being is not impossible) should be granted, for we have already said about as much as there is to be said on the question whether necessary existence is a perfection.

We proceed to show that this argument is valid. It will be easiest to display the reasoning behind the modal ontological argument diagrammatically. Let us suppose (just to keep the diagram manageable; our argument in no way depends on how many possible worlds there are) that there are exactly four possible worlds, which we shall call One, Two, Three, and Four. We shall represent each possible world by a circle. And let us represent the assertion that, in a given possible world, there exists something having a given property, by placing inside the circle representing that possible world a symbol representing that property. For example, if 'W' represents wisdom, then the figure

Four ⓦ

represents the assertion that in Possible World Four there exists something wise. And let us represent the assertion that a given possible world is actual by placing the symbol '<' to the right of the circle representing that possible world. (We shall call this symbol the 'actuality cursor', since it will be useful to think of it as a movable "pointer.") Thus, the figure

Two 〇 <

represents the assertion that Possible World Two is the actual world, and the figure

One ⓦ <

represents the assertion that Possible World One is actual and contains something wise. By a *world-diagram* we mean a diagram satisfying two conditions: first, the diagram must contain labeled circles representing each of the possible worlds, and, secondly, the diagram must contain the actuality cursor (the symbol '<'), placed to the right of exactly one of the circles. (The second condition corresponds to the fact that exactly one possible world is actual.)

In addition to these two "required" features, a world-diagram may also have the following "optional" feature: it may contain any number of symbols representing properties, these symbols being placed inside any or all of the circles. If a symbol representing a certain property occurs anywhere in a world-diagram, its absence from a circle in that diagram represents the assertion that in the world that circle represents nothing has that property.

The following figure satisfies the defining conditions of a world-diagram and therefore *is* a world-diagram:

One   (W)

Two   ( )

Three ( )   <

Four (W)
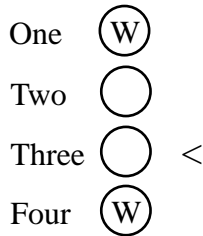
A world-diagram is to be understood as telling us which possible worlds there are and which of them is the actual world; it may also tell us whether, in various of those possible worlds, there are things having certain specified properties. The above diagram represents the assertions that there are exactly four possible worlds, One, Two, Three, and Four, that Three is the actual world, that in worlds One and Four something is wise, and that in worlds Two and Three nothing is wise.

A world-diagram is said to be "correct in" a given possible world if (and only if) every assertion represented in the diagram is true in that possible world. The above diagram is correct in Possible World Three if it is true in Three that there exist exactly the four possible worlds displayed in the diagram, that Possible World Three is the one that is actual, that in worlds One and Four something is wise, and that in worlds Two and Three nothing is wise.

Let us now see how world-diagrams can help us with the question whether the conclusion of the modal ontological argument follows from its two premises. Let us assume for the sake of argument that the premises of the modal ontological argument are both true and see whether we can deduce its conclusion from this assumption. The first premise tells us that a perfect being, a being having all perfections essentially, is possible. That is to say: in at least one possible world there exists a being who has all perfections essentially. Let us arbitrarily assume that such a being exists in Possible World Two—that Two is the possible world, or one of the possible worlds, in which there is a perfect being. Our arbitrary choice of Possible World Two as a "starting point" can do no harm since, according to the premise whose truth we have assumed, a perfect being must exist either in One or in Two or

in Three or in Four (or else in more than one of these four possible worlds), and we shall see that the reasoning we are about to examine would lead to the same conclusion no matter which possible world we took as our starting point.

Let us use the symbol 'P' to stand for the property of being a perfect being (that is, the property of having all perfections essentially), and let us suppose that a certain inhabitant of Possible World Two, William, is set the task of drawing a world-diagram showing how the property P is, as we might say, distributed among the possible worlds. William, let us suppose, knows there is a perfect being in Two, and he therefore begins drawing his diagram as follows:

Two   (P)   <

Why does William place the actuality cursor to the right of the circle representing Possible World Two? Well, we are imagining William's constructing his diagram *in* Possible World Two, and it is true in Possible World Two that Possible World Two is the actual world. (In general, it is true in any given possible world that *that* possible world is the actual world—just as it is true in any story that everything in that story is true.)

Can William fill in the rest of the world-diagram he has begun? He can, for he may reason as follows. "Let's see . . . I know a perfect being exists. Suppose I call that being—or one of them if there's more than one—'X'. X has all perfections, and one perfection is necessary existence. Therefore, X exists in all possible worlds. Moreover, I know that X has all perfections essentially. That is, I know that X has all perfections in every possible world in which X exists. I can infer that, in every possible world, something—X—has the property P. Therefore, the following world-diagram

One   (P)
Two   (P)   <
Three (P)
Four   (P)

correctly represents the distribution of the property P among the various possible worlds."

Let us assume for the moment that the reasoning we have attributed to William is correct. Then—given the truth of our two premises—it follows that the world-diagram William has drawn is correct in Possible World Two. Can we infer from this anything about which world-diagrams are correct in the other three possible

worlds? We certainly cannot infer that *this* world-diagram is correct in any other possible world, for this diagram tells us that Possible World Two is the actual world, and that proposition is, as we have seen, true only in Two. But let us make just one change in William's diagram; let us take the actuality cursor and "slide it down a notch," so that it is placed beside the circle representing Possible World Three:

One　Ⓟ

Two　Ⓟ

Three　Ⓟ　<

Four　Ⓟ
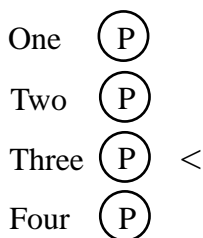
The revised diagram says that Possible World Three is the actual world. This assertion is true in Possible World Three. Does it follow from the assumption that William's diagram is correct in Two that the revised diagram is correct in Three? The following general principle of modal reasoning would justify this conclusion:

> If a world-diagram is correct in the possible world x, then the diagram obtained from it by moving the actuality cursor until it is beside the circle representing the possible world y is correct in the possible world y.

This principle seems intuitively very plausible. All it really says is (i) that the same possible worlds exist from the perspective of every possible world, and (ii) that the "inner" or intrinsic features of a given possible world are features that world has from the perspective of every possible world. It could be summed up in the following slogan: the only thing that changes from possible world to possible world is which possible world is actual. But this slogan is ambiguous, for there is a sense in which lots of other things "change from possible world to possible world": who won the battle of Waterloo, the population of Russia, whether I exist—in fact, everything that could be different. A more cautious way to put the thought the slogan is intended to convey is this: The only thing about a possible world x that can "change" or "look different" when x is "viewed from" various possible worlds (including x itself) is whether x is actual.

Thus, the only feature of the whole set of possible worlds that two possible worlds "disagree" about is which member of that set is the actual world. (They must, of course, disagree about *at least* this much, since it is true in each possible world that *it* is the actual world. Our principle says that this is *all* they disagree about.) We have, in fact, already assumed this principle, or something very much like it. We assumed it when we were describing William's reasoning. William, we

remember, reasoned (in part) as follows: "I can infer that, in every possible world, something—X—has the property P. Therefore, the following world-diagram

One   (P)
Two   (P) <
Three   (P)
Four   (P)
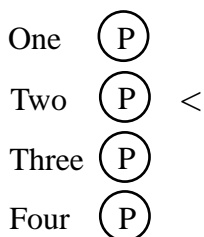
correctly represents the distribution of the property P among the various possible worlds." But what—a carping critic might ask—allows us to assume that William, having reached the conclusion that, in every possible world, something had the property P, would go on to draw the world-diagram displayed above? Why shouldn't he go on to draw, say, the following diagram?

One   (P)
Two   (P) <
Three   (P)
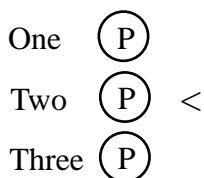
"But we are assuming that there are four possible worlds, One, Two, Three, and Four, and this world-diagram asserts that there are only *three* possible worlds, One, Two, and Three." True, the carping critic replies, but if possible worlds One, Two, Three, and Four exist, it does not follow that *in Possible World Two* those same four possible worlds exist. That would follow if we assumed that Possible World Two was the actual world (in which case what was true in Two would be the same as what was true "period"); it would also follow from the weaker assumption that the possible worlds that exist from the point of view of Two are the same ones that exist from the point of view of the actual world. But suppose that (say) Possible World Four is the actual world and that, according to Possible World Two, there are only the three possible worlds One, Two, and Three. Then, for all we know, the following world-diagram might be correct in Four:

One   (P)
Two   (P)
Three   (P)
Four   ( ) <
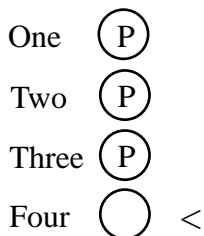
If this diagram is indeed correct in Possible World Four, there is no perfect being in Four (which, remember, is the actual world) even though it is true in Two that a perfect being exists in all possible worlds—for, from the point of view of Possible World Two, there is no such possible world as Four. And this shows that the conclusion of the modal ontological argument does not follow from its premises; for all we know we are in just the situation we have imagined: a perfect being is *possible* because it exists in a certain possible world, but it does not *in fact exist* because the possible world that is in fact the actual world does not exist—even as a possibility— from the point of view of the world in which the perfect being exists.

Here ends the carping critic's carping. What the critic is suggesting is, in effect, that what is possible is not fixed and necessary: certain things that are *in fact* possible *might not have been* possible. For example, if Possible World Four does not exist from the point of view of Possible World Two, this means—given that Four is the actual world—that the way things are might not have been even possible. The critic is in fact suggesting that what is possible and impossible might have been different. And this does not seem to be a very plausible notion.

At any rate, it does not seem to be very plausible if by "possible and impossible" we understand those things that are possible and impossible "in themselves," as opposed to those things that are possible and impossible in relation to other things. Perhaps some examples will make the proposed distinction clearer. It is now impossible for anyone to own a passenger pigeon; that is because passenger pigeons are now extinct. It was impossible for anyone to fly to the moon in 1930; that was because the relevant technology had not yet been invented. Such impossibilities as these we might call conditional impossibilities, since their impossibility is conditional on something that might have been different: *if* passenger pigeons had not become extinct (as they might well not have), it *wouldn't* be impossible to own one; *if* the pace of technological development since the beginning of the industrial revolution had been considerably more rapid (as presumably it might have been), it *wouldn't* have been impossible to fly to the moon in 1930. One might even argue that, although it is in fact impossible to travel at 400,000 kilometers per second, it wouldn't have been impossible if the speed of light were twice what it is, and that the speed of light could have been—in some sense of 'could have been'—twice what it is. But the impossibility of a round square or a liquid wine bottle is not conditional on anything; such things are simply, without qualification, impossible. This kind of impossibility we may call *intrinsic* impossibility, and we may say that what is not intrinsically impossible is intrinsically possible.

It seems very plausible to suppose that although what is conditionally impossible may be different in different possible worlds, what is intrinsically impossible (and intrinsically possible) is the same in all possible worlds. A round square is in-

trinsically impossible, and it would have been intrinsically impossible no matter what: not only is there no possible world in which there are round squares, but there is no possible world in which it is true that there *could be* round squares. A sixty-meter-high marzipan statue of Lassie is intrinsically possible, and it would have been intrinsically possible no matter what: not only is there a possible world in which there is a sixty-meter-high marzipan statue of Lassie, but there is no possible world in which it is true that there *couldn't be* a sixty-meter-high marzipan statue of Lassie.

The lesson of our reply to the carping critic is this: the validity of the modal ontological argument depends on the assumption that what is intrinsically possible has that status as a matter of necessity. But that is no defect in the argument, for that assumption is very plausible indeed. Our "general principle of modal reasoning" in fact embodies this very plausible assumption. If we accept this principle, we immediately see that if the above world-diagram were indeed correct in Possible World Four, as suggested, then the "three world" diagram would not be correct in Two; instead—the principle says—the following diagram would be correct in Two:

One   (P)
Two   (P)   <
Three (P)
Four ( )
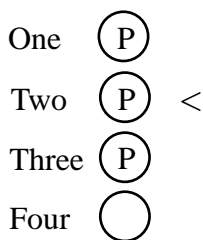
Let us assume that the proposed general principle of modal reasoning is indeed correct. Then a world-diagram obtained from the figure

One   (P)
Two   (P)
Three (P)
Four (P)
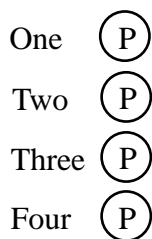
by an appropriate placement of the actuality cursor will be correct in every possible world. (The world-diagram obtained by placing the actuality cursor on the top line of the figure will be correct in Possible World One, the world-diagram obtained by placing the actuality cursor on the second line of the figure will be correct in Possible

World Two, and so on.) Therefore, no matter which of the four possible worlds the actual world is, a perfect being exists in the actual world. (It should now be evident that our argument did not depend on our simplifying assumption, the assumption that there were just four possible worlds. And neither did it depend on our arbitrary choice of Possible World Two as our "starting point": if we had begun by assuming that a perfect being existed in One or in Three or in Four, we should have got the same result.)

Have we therefore proved the existence of a perfect being? If we have, then we have answered the question, Why should there be anything at all? If there has to be a perfect being—and the modal ontological argument claims to show not only that there *is* a perfect being, but that there *has to be* one—then it is impossible for there to be nothing at all. But the modal ontological argument rests on two premises and a general principle of modal reasoning. And at least one of these three things is far from evident: that a perfect being is not impossible. Our argument perhaps shows that the concept of a perfect being is in an important way unlike the concept of a lion or a unicorn. It is not impossible for there to be unicorns,[8] but there are none. If there were no lions, it would nevertheless be possible for there to be lions, and lions, despite their possibility, would not exist. A perfect being, however, is not like that: if a perfect being is so much as intrinsically possible—like a unicorn, and unlike a liquid wine bottle—then a perfect being really does exist. But is a perfect being possible?

This is a question we cannot evade, for there can be no presumption in favor of possibility. It may be that in many areas of thought and inquiry one is entitled to assume that a certain concept is possible—not self-contradictory, not intrinsically impossible—in the absence of a argument for its impossibility, rather as, under Common Law, a person is to be presumed innocent of a charge till proved guilty. But this cannot be a presumption in any area of inquiry in which modal reasoning like that which we have been considering is employed. This contention is easily demonstrated by the fact that such a presumption of possibility would lead to contradictory results.

To see that this *is* a fact, consider the concept of a "knowno": the concept of a being who knows that there is no perfect being. There would seem to be no reason, on the face of it, to suppose that there being a knowno is an intrinsically impossible state of affairs, like there being a liquid wine bottle. But consider. If a knowno is not intrinsically impossible, there is a knowno in some possible world. But then there is a possible world in which there is no perfect being, since, if someone knows something, then what that person knows is true. And, as we have seen, if a perfect being is possible, then there exists a perfect being in every possible world. It follows that if a knowno is possible, a perfect being is impossible—

and that if a perfect being is possible, a knowno is impossible. (The two statements 'If a knowno is possible, a perfect being is impossible' and 'If a perfect being is possible, a knowno is impossible' are logically equivalent.)

We have, therefore, a pair of concepts—the concept of a perfect being and the concept of a knowno—such that either of them is possible only if the other is impossible. And we have no argument for the impossibility of either concept. If we adopted the general rule "A concept is to be assumed to be possible in the absence of an argument for its impossibility," we should have to assume both these concepts to be possible, and we know that it is false that they are both possible. (It is interesting to note that we cannot consistently adopt the Common Law principle "A person is to be presumed innocent of a charge till proved guilty" if we know that either Alice or Bertram murdered Clara but have no proof that Alice murdered her and no proof that Bertram murdered her. The best we can do in such a case if we want to be logically consistent is not to assume that Alice is guilty and not to assume that Bertram is guilty.)

If we wish to evaluate the modal ontological argument, therefore, there is no alternative to attempting to find some argument for the conclusion that the concept of a perfect being is possible or else some argument for the conclusion that a perfect being is impossible.

How might we do this? Well, how, in general, do we go about finding out whether a concept is possible? The most reliable way of showing a concept to be possible is to show that it has *instances*: the most reliable way of showing the concept of a dog to be possible is to show that there are dogs; the most reliable way of showing the concept of a unicorn to be possible is to show that there are unicorns—and so on. But this method will not help us to find out whether the concept of a perfect being is possible, since we do not know whether there are any perfect beings. (Or, if some among us do know that there is a perfect being, or do know that there is no perfect being, this knowledge is certainly not *common* knowledge, and it is not, therefore, knowledge that we can appeal to in presenting a metaphysical argument that is not addressed to any particular group of people.)

What other methods are there? There is always the method of abstract metaphysical argument. The seventeenth-century metaphysician G. W. Leibniz claimed to have discovered a metaphysical argument demonstrating the possibility of a perfect being. (Leibniz, a very acute modal reasoner, saw that any successful version of the ontological argument must include a proof of the possibility of a perfect being.) His reasoning was as follows. A perfect being is a being possessing all perfections; a perfect being is therefore possible if all perfections are consistent with one another. And every perfection is a "simple, positive property." (A property is a "simple" property if it is not a complex that includes simpler properties, as *being both red*

and round is a complex that includes both *being red* and *being round*. A property is a "positive" property if it is not a negative property: *being red* and *being round* are positive properties, and *not being red* and *being non-round* are negative properties.) And all simple, positive properties are consistent with one another, since the only way for two properties to be inconsistent is for one to be the negation of the other (example: *not being red* is the negation of *being red*) or for one to be a complex that includes the negation of the other or the negation of a property included in the other (example: *being round and not red* is inconsistent with both *being red* and *being hard and red*).

Leibniz held that most of our everyday adjectives stood for elaborate complexes of simple, positive properties and their negations. This is what makes it possible for, say, 'hard' and 'soft' to denote incompatible properties; a complete analysis of hardness and softness would bring to light at least one simple, positive property F such that one of the two includes F and the other includes the negation of F. It obviously follows from this analysis of inconsistency that no simple, positive property is inconsistent with any other simple, positive property. And, if every perfection is indeed a simple, positive property, it follows that a being who has all perfections is possible. (It does not, however, follow that a perfect being, in *our* sense of the term, is possible, for we have defined a perfect being as a being who has all perfections *essentially*. To reach the further conclusion that a perfect being in our sense was possible, we should need some further premise, such as 'If a property is a perfection, then the property of having *that* property essentially is also a perfection'. An instance of this general thesis would be: If wisdom is a perfection, then *having wisdom essentially* is also a perfection. One might, of course, wonder whether *both* wisdom and *having wisdom essentially* could be simple, positive properties.)

There are a great many problems with Leibniz's argument. I will mention only one of them. It is not at all clear whether the idea of a simple, positive property makes any sense. Let us look just at the idea of a positive property (remarks similar to those that follow apply to the idea of a simple property). Consider the property *not having parts*. This would seem to be a pretty good example of a negative property, being obviously the negation of the property *having parts*. But suppose we call the property of not having parts 'simplicity', as Leibniz himself did. (He in fact regarded it as one of the perfections, and thus as a simple, positive property.) Then we can call the property of having parts 'non-simplicity', and, if we do our thinking in this terminology, it looks as if non-simplicity is the negative property, being the negation of simplicity. This case suggests that properties are not negative or positive *in themselves* and that the belief that they are is a mistaken inference from the fact that properties can have names that have negative or positive forms. There is a good deal more to this issue, however, and Leibniz would have a lot to

say in reply to what I have said. In this brief passage I have tried only to give a rough idea of why I regard Leibniz's argument for the possibility of a perfect being as unsatisfactory.

If we find it difficult to show that the concept of a perfect being is possible, this could be because that concept is in fact impossible. If this were true, is there any way in which it might be demonstrated? A concept can sometimes be shown to be impossible by the deduction of a known impossibility (such as a formal contradiction) from the proposition that that concept applies to something. For example, the following argument shows that "round square" is an impossible concept: if there were a round square it would have corners (since it is square) and would also not have corners (since it is round).

The Anglo-American philosopher J. N. Findlay once claimed to be able to show that an impossibility could be derived from the concept of a perfect being. His argument was that a perfect being must be a necessary being, and that an impossibility follows from the concept of a necessary being. An impossibility follows from the concept of a necessary being, Findlay argues, because if there were a necessary being, there would have to be at least one necessarily true existential proposition, and necessarily true existential propositions are impossible. (An existential proposition is a proposition asserting the existence of something, a proposition of the form "There is an *x*" or "There exists an *x*" or "An *x* exists.") Necessarily true existential propositions are impossible because necessary truths are just those truths that owe their status as truths to the meanings of words. (For example, it is necessarily true that all nuns are female; but the necessity of all nuns' being female is due simply to the fact that "female" is a part of the meaning of the word 'nun': the word 'nun' is inapplicable to males—even members of religious orders—, for 'nun' means '*woman* belonging to a religious order, membership in which implies vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience'.)

Now it is obviously impossible (the argument continues) for a true existential proposition to owe its truth to the meanings of words. It may be a consequence of the meanings of the word A and the word B that whatever A applies to, B also applies to—as with 'nun' and 'female'. But it can never be a consequence simply of the meaning of the word A that A applies to anything. We may give to 'nun' or 'aardvark' or 'molybdenum' whatever meanings we like, but these meanings will never guarantee that there is anything to which these words apply. But for there to be a necessary existential proposition, there would have to be a word or words whose meaning guaranteed that they applied to something, and this, as we have seen, is impossible.

To retrace the steps of the argument: there can be no such thing as a necessary existential proposition, so there can be no such thing as a necessary being, so there

can be no such thing as a perfect being. And, therefore, the modal ontological argument has a false premise: that a perfect being is not impossible. And, therefore, the modal ontological argument is a failure, and we are still without an answer to the question, Why should there be anything at all?

The main problem with Findlay's argument lies in the theory of necessary truth to which it appeals. Findlay tells us that there can be no necessary existential propositions. And he tells us that there can be no necessary existential propositions because, for every necessarily true proposition, the fact that that proposition is true is a consequence of the meanings of words. This theory of necessary truth was almost universally accepted by English-speaking philosophers at the time at which Findlay wrote (1948).[9] It was widely, if not universally, regarded as a theory that philosophical investigation had shown to be true. As of the time of this writing, however, it has become merely a part of the history of philosophy. Let us consider an example, the proposition that the atomic number of iron is 26. A great many philosophers of logic and language currently working maintain that this proposition is necessarily true and that its truth is not due to the meanings of words. They would argue that this proposition is necessarily true because the atomic structure of an element is of its very essence and that no matter how much some possible metal might superficially resemble iron, unless the nuclei of the atoms that composed it contained twenty-six protons, it would simply not *be* iron. And yet (their argument continues) it is not a part of the meaning of the word 'iron' that it apply only to a stuff that is a chemical element having the atomic number 26—for something can be a part of the meaning of a word only if a person who knows the meaning of that word knows it is (as, for example, a person who knows the meaning of the word 'nun' knows that "female" is a part of the meaning of 'nun'). That this is so is evident from such facts as the following: lots of people who have no idea that there is such a concept as "atomic number" know the meaning of the word 'iron' perfectly well; Queen Elizabeth I meant by the word 'iron' just what you and I mean by it, even though she died long before the advent of modern chemistry (lots of English words have changed their meanings since the sixteenth century, but 'iron' is not one of them); the Latin word 'ferrum' means exactly what the English word 'iron' means, even though Latin ceased to be a living language a thousand years before the advent of modern chemistry.

We should note, however, that even if these philosophers are right, it does not follow that there can be necessary existential propositions, for 'The atomic number of iron is 26' is not an existential proposition: if the currently popular theory I have sketched is right, this proposition states one of the essential characteristics of iron; it does not say that there *is* any iron. But it does follow from this theory that the account of necessary truth on which Findlay bases his premise (that there can

be no necessary existential propositions) is mistaken. And there are propositions many philosophers would say *were* necessary existential propositions. Mathematics provides many plausible examples of necessary existential propositions, such as 'There exists a number that can be expressed in more than one way as the sum of two cubes'. It is true that mathematical examples provide only cases of necessary propositions that assert the existence of universals, such as numbers. Still, they tend to undermine Findlay's position, since his argument and its conclusion are very general. His argument proceeds from premises about the nature of language, and its conclusion should hold for any proposition, regardless of its subject-matter. His conclusion would therefore appear to be refuted by *any* example of a necessary existential proposition, no matter what its subject-matter was. If his argument were sound, it would show that there could be no necessary existential propositions, even in mathematics.

If this much is correct, however, it does not show that there could be a necessarily existent *individual thing*. Perhaps only universals like numbers can be necessarily existent. And a perfect being would certainly have to be an individual thing. Findlay's argument may be refuted by the observation that it proves too much (that there could not be necessarily existent universals), but even if this is granted, it has no tendency to show that his stated conclusion—the impossibility of a perfect being—is wrong. I know of no argument that purports to show that there could not be a necessarily existent individual thing, with the exception of Findlay-style arguments for the conclusion that there could not be a necessarily existent *anything*. Such an argument would have to show that the two properties *being necessarily existent* and *being an individual thing* were inconsistent with each other, and I can see no way of constructing even a plausible candidate for such an argument.

It is interesting to note that if these two properties are *not* inconsistent, then there is in fact a necessarily existent individual thing. This can be shown by a simplified version of the reasoning we used to show the validity of the modal ontological argument:

> If a necessarily existent individual thing is possible, then there is a necessarily existent individual thing in some possible world. Since that individual thing is necessarily existent in that possible world, it is true in that possible world that it, that very individual thing, exists in all possible worlds. It follows that it is true in every possible world that that thing exists in all possible worlds, since "nothing changes from possible world to possible world but which possible world is actual." Moreover, it seems evident that the property *being an individual thing* is essential to whatever has it; if something is an individual thing, it could not have been a universal or a mere collection or a stuff or any other kind of non-individual thing.

Therefore, this being not only exists in every possible world but is also an individual thing in every possible world. And there is thus a necessarily existent individual thing in every possible world, including, of course, whichever world is the actual world. Therefore, there actually is a necessarily existent individual thing.

This argument, which we may call the *minimal* modal ontological argument, shows that the reasoning underlying the modal ontological argument does not really have anything to do with the concept of a perfect being. What this reasoning really shows is that, for any set of properties whatever, if it is possible for there to be a thing that is necessarily existent and has all these properties essentially, then there actually is something that is necessarily existent and has all these properties essentially. (A perfect being is a being that has all perfections and has them essentially; a perfect being is thus a being that is necessarily existent—necessary existence being a perfection—and has a certain set of properties essentially.)

This result has an important consequence: the minimal modal ontological argument will serve our purposes as well as the modal ontological argument itself. (Our question is, Why is there something rather than nothing? and any individual thing is a "something.") It is free from logical error if the modal ontological argument itself is free from logical error, and its controversial premise—a necessarily existent individual thing is possible—is true if the corresponding premise of the modal ontological argument is true. I say 'if' and not 'only if' because the proposition that a perfect being is possible entails that a necessarily existent individual thing is possible, but the reverse entailment does not hold, or at least does not obviously hold. A perfect being has to be a necessarily existent individual thing, but a necessarily existent individual thing does not have to be a perfect being, or does not obviously have to be a perfect being. It may, therefore, be possible to find out whether the premise of the minimal modal ontological argument is true even if it is impossible to find out whether the corresponding premise of the modal ontological argument ('A perfect being is not impossible') is true. Let us then turn our attention to the minimal modal ontological argument and ask whether its premise is true; that is, whether a necessarily existent individual thing is possible; that is, whether the properties *existing necessarily* and *being an individual thing* are compatible. It does not seem possible to deduce any formal contradiction from the assumption that there is a necessarily existent individual thing. Nevertheless, these two properties may well be incompatible. It is hard to believe that the two properties *being a solid sheet of iron* and *being as transparent as glass* are compatible, but there is no way of deriving a formal contradiction from the proposition 'There is a sheet of solid iron as transparent as glass'. Still, the two properties *may* be compatible. How could one know? I am at a loss to answer this question. In general, there

are only two "foolproof" ways to discover whether two properties are compatible. One knows that two properties are compatible if one knows that there is in fact something that has both of them. And one knows that two properties are incompatible if one can deduce an impossibility (such as a formal contradiction) from the assumption that something has both of them. As I have said, I know of no way to apply the latter method in the case of necessary existence and individuality. And as to the former method, if I knew how to prove the existence of a necessarily existent individual thing, I should have no need of the minimal modal ontological argument, since I should know that its conclusion—that a necessarily existent individual thing exists—was true independently of the minimal modal ontological argument.

If we cannot demonstrate the possibility of a necessarily existent individual thing, we certainly cannot demonstrate the possibility of a perfect being, since a perfect being is a being that is a necessarily existent individual thing *and* has various other properties—such as wisdom and goodness and unlimited power (or whatever the perfections other than necessary existence may be). And although there might in theory be a proof of the impossibility of a perfect being that was not a proof of the impossibility of a necessarily existent individual thing—a proof, say, that wisdom was a perfection, together with a proof that wisdom was incompatible with necessary existence—no one has in fact proposed such a proof and no such proof suggests itself. All the proofs of the impossibility of a perfect being anyone has ever proposed are (supposed) proofs of the impossibility of necessary existence. It would seem, therefore, that the long history of the ontological argument, from Saint Anselm to the present day, is at best inconclusive. Every version of the argument either contains some logical error or other or else depends upon a premise whose claim to truth we are unable to adjudicate. And, therefore, we have not found an answer to the question, Why should there be anything at all?

There is, nevertheless, one valuable lesson we have learned from our study of the ontological argument. If we could show that there was a necessary being, a necessarily existing individual thing, we should have an answer to our question. For if there were a necessary being, it would be impossible for there to be nothing. And if we could show that it was impossible for there to be nothing, that, surely, would count as an answer to our question.

Is there any approach to the question whether there is a necessary being other than *via* the ontological argument? There is indeed. It has often been suggested that if there were no necessary being there could not be any beings at all. If this "if" statement could be shown to be true, we could combine it with the obvious truth that there is something to show that there is a necessary being. We shall discuss this possibility in the next chapter.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Plantinga's *The Ontological Argument* is an excellent collection. See especially the selections from Anselm, Gaunilo, Aquinas, Descartes (including Descartes's replies to the objections of various philosophers), Leibniz, Kant, Findlay, Malcolm, and Hartshorne. Plantinga's *God, Freedom, and Evil* contains a powerful and sophisticated discussion of the ontological argument in various versions, including the "modal" version (pp. 85–111).

Hume's seminal argument for the conclusion that there can be no necessary existential propositions occurs in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part IX. Current "anti-Humean" views on the nature of necessary truth are contained in Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* and Putnam's "The Meaning of 'Meaning'." These are difficult works for those without formal philosophical training, but are, at least in large part, accessible to the highly motivated reader. Schwartz's *Naming, Necessity, and Natural Kinds* is a useful collection of essays on the issues raised by Kripke and Putnam. Kripke's important essay "Identity and Necessity" is particularly recommended.

Notes

1. The label 'ontological argument' seems first to have been applied to Anselm's and Descartes's arguments by Kant in the eighteenth century. The word 'ontological' is derived from the Greek word for 'being' or 'existence.'

2. What Kant actually says is that being is "a logical but not a real predicate (*Prädikat*)." I believe the idea he intended to express by this formula is more or less the idea I have expressed in the text by the words 'Existence is not a property.'

3. The refutation of Descartes's argument attributed to Kant in the text contains only one of the points Kant makes against the argument. For two hundred years, philosophers discussing the ontological argument represented this "refutation" as decisive and neglected another, more effective point that Kant makes against the argument. This point could be put as follows: Granted, a non-existent perfect being is a contradiction in terms; but a non-existent golden mountain is just as much a contradiction in terms, and for the same reason: to say *there is* a *non-existent* golden mountain is to contradict oneself; a non-existent *anything* is, for this reason, and this reason alone, a contradiction in terms; hence, from 'A non-existent X is a contradiction in terms', one cannot validly deduce 'An X exists.'

4. Or perhaps it would be better to say, "a complete specification of a way *a* World might have been," for it may be that the World is a full-fledged individual thing, as opposed to a mere collection, and that if things had been sufficiently different, that in-

dividual thing would not have existed at all, and some other individual thing—either a part of the World or some individual thing that does not exist at all—would have been the referent of the description 'the World'.

5. What allows us to speak of *the* actual world here? Why can't *two* possible worlds specify the way things really are? Well, those two possible worlds, being, by definition, completely specific, would have to agree in every detail—otherwise at least one of them would get the way things really are wrong. If, according to one of the two possible worlds, the number of Douglas fir trees in Canada is odd and according to the other it is even, then it can't be that both possible worlds get the way things really are right, for, as things really are, the number of Douglas firs in Canada is either odd or even. But if the two possible worlds agree about *everything*, in what sense are they *two* possible worlds, two *different* specifications of how things are? Does it make sense to speak of two specifications of the features of, say, a house that are the same in every detail and yet are two different specifications? At any rate, I am going to make this true by definition: if *x* and *y* are possible worlds, and if *x* and *y* agree in every detail, then *x* and *y* are one and the same possible world.

6. Here is an example of an invalid modal argument that, on first blush, could appear to be valid: It is impossible for a hippopotamus to be an elephant; The largest animal in the local zoo is a hippopotamus; Therefore, it is impossible for the largest animal in the local zoo to be an elephant. It is easy to see that something must be wrong with this argument because it is easy to see that its premises might be true and its conclusion false. But metaphysical arguments turning on just the modal fallacy this argument illustrates have been accepted by philosophers.

7. The logically sophisticated will be aware that this premise must be read as saying not only that the property of existing necessarily is in fact a perfection but that it would exist and would be a perfection no matter what. But few would want to deny that *if* there is such a property as necessary existence, and *if* this property is a perfection, then it would exist no matter what and would be a perfection no matter what.

8. At any rate, it is possible for there to be animals shaped the way the unicorns of legend are supposed to be shaped. The American philosopher Saul Kripke has, however, presented interesting and plausible arguments for the conclusion that no possible animal would really count as a *unicorn* and that unicorns are therefore impossible.

9. But it was by no means a recent invention. Hume, for example, wrote, "Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction." (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, IX. The *Dialogues* were first published in 1779, three years after Hume's death.)