NECESSARY BEING

The Ontological Argument

Selection from *Metaphysics* 4th edition, Chapter 6, by Peter van Inwagen,

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 those 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. 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 the French philosopher Rene 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." 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 conceiving 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, ask 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', and 'located in the city of Agra'. 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 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. 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, those 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. 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 pre-stellar nebulae had not led to the gravitational contraction of a certain cloud of 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 about fourteen thousand million years ago failed to produce any universe at all, or because this cause (or some other 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 of 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, but which, in place of the premise 'Existence is a perfection' has the premise 'Necessary existence is a perfection':

- A perfect being has all perfections.
- Necessary existence is a perfection.

Hence, A perfect being has necessary existence.

- Whatever has necessary 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 say the three properties that occur in this definition (necessary existence, being made of gold, and being a mountain) are "negmontanic properties"—and are the only 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 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. …

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 that "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. 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 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. 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. 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 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 any given property is in fact possessed essentially by any given 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), the other might (have existed and) have been unwise. The nature of the former being is incompatible with unwisdom, and the nature of the latter is compatible with both 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:

- It is not impossible for there to be a perfect being (that is, a being that possesses all perfections essentially),
- Necessary existence is a perfection,

Hence, There is a perfect being.

[The verdict on this argument is that it is valid – the conclusion follows from the premises. But the first premise is suspect, and requires further argument that is not easy to produce.]