Arguments for the Existence of God

LEARNING OUTCOMES

In this section of the Module you will be introduced to three major traditional arguments for the existence of God as conceived in the Abrahamic religions: the ontological and cosmological arguments, and the argument from (or for) design. Each section will present the relevant argument in a traditional formulation, and present objections and responses to objections. You will be invited at intervals to put forward your own views on the texts and issues.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In this section of the Module we will be considering a number of texts. Although they will be taken from the Christian tradition, in several cases similar arguments are found in medieval Jewish and Islamic thinkers, and even in pre-Christian philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics.

Immanuel Kant distinguished and labelled three traditional arguments for the existence of God: the ontological, the cosmological, and the physico-teleological (now called 'the argument from design'). Although it is usual to speak in each case of '*the* ... argument', the labels identify what are really sorts or families of arguments, each including different specific versions. The order in which Kant discussed the arguments is at once logical and chronological:

• logical, because there is a progression from arguments whose premisses make no claims about the world, to arguments whose premisses make some very non-specific claims about the world, to arguments whose premisses make highly specific claims about the world;

• chronological, because the order of Kant's listing corresponds to the historical order in which the arguments were invented or became prominent in the Christian tradition.

It has often been said that believers do not need such arguments, and that unbelievers are not converted by them, so that formulating them is a waste of time. Wittgenstein wrote:

> A proof of God's existence ought really to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists. But I think that what *believers* who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is to give their 'belief' an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs. Perhaps one could 'convince someone that God exists' by means of a certain kind of upbringing, by shaping his life in such and such a way.

(L.Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p.85)

Historically speaking, believers have had two main reasons for putting forward these arguments: to refute atheists and sceptics, and to improve their own understanding of the doctrines they held by faith. Either way, believers were not seeking to produce religious faith by purely intellectual means—if indeed there is such a thing as a purely intellectual religious belief (for doubts, see Malcolm (1977). Most Christian believers have also held that faith is a gift from God.

I. THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

HISTORICAL

The expression 'ontological argument' was invented by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, B620ff. It has been described as 'imposing, universally adopted, and wholly opaque'. It covers any argument for God's existence that is based solely on some feature or other of the *concept* of God. Any ontological argument will imply that there is a self-contradiction in denying God's existence, so that atheism is incoherent.

THE FIRST ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

This appears in the second chapter of a Latin work called the *Proslogion* (*Allocution*), written by Anselm in 1078. It was originally entitled *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (*Faith in Search of Understanding*). Anselm was prior of the Abbey of Bec in Normandy at the time, and later had a stormy career as Archbishop of Canterbury. He was the leading theologian of his age.

Document 1 is the text of Anselm's argument in *Proslogion*, ch.2:

> Therefore, Lord, who grant understanding to faith, grant me that, in so far as you know it beneficial, I understand that you are as we believe and you are that which we believe. Now we believe that you are something than which nothing greater can be imagined. Then is there no such nature, since the fool has said in his heart: God is not? But certainly this same fool when he hears this very thing that I am saying - something than which nothing greater can be imagined - understands what he hears; and what he understands is in his understanding, even if he does not understand that it is. For it is one thing for a thing to be in the understanding and another to understand that a thing is. For when a painter imagines beforehand what he is going to make, he has in his understanding what he has not yet made, but he does not yet understand that it is. Therefore even the fool is bound to agree that there is at least in the understanding something than which nothing greater can be imagined, because when he hears this he understands it, and whatever is understood is in the understanding. And certainly that than which a greater cannot be imagined cannot be in the understanding alone. For if it is at least in the understanding alone, it can be imagined to be in reality too, which is greater. Therefore if that than which a greater cannot be imagined is in the understanding alone, that very thing than which a greater cannot be imagined is something than which a greater can be imagined. But certainly this cannot be. There exists, therefore, beyond doubt something than which a greater cannot be imagined, both in the understanding and in reality.
> [Anselm, Proslogion 2. Latin text in F.S.Schmitt (ed.), Sancti Anselmi Opera Omnia, vol. I (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1946). Eng. transl. in J. Barnes, The Ontological Argument (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1972), pp. 2-3.]

Despite its originality and historical importance, this is not the best introduction to the Ontological Argument, because of its unfamiliar concepts, and a certain amount of careless formulation. The first modern formulation was given by Descartes, in the fifth of his *Meditations*.

Exercise

Please now read **Document 2**, and set out in your own words what you take Descartes' argument to be:

> [1] If just because I can draw the idea of something from my thought, it follows that all which I know clearly and distinctly as pertaining to this object does really belong to it, may I not derive from this an argument demonstrating the existence of God? It is certain

that I no less find the idea of God, that is to say, the idea of a supremely perfect Being, in me, than that of any figure or number whatever it is; and I do not know any less clearly and distinctly that an actual and eternal existence pertains to this nature than I know that all that which I am able to demonstrate of some figure or number truly pertains to the nature of this figure or number, and therefore, although all that I concluded in the preceding Meditations were found to be false, the existence of God would pass with me as at least as certain as I have ever held the truths of mathematics to be.

[2] This indeed is not at first manifest, since it would seem to present some appearance of being a sophism. For being accustomed in all other things to make a distinction between existence and essence, I easily persuade myself that the existence can be separated from the essence of God, and that we can thus conceive God as not actually existing. But, nevertheless, when I think of it with more attention, I clearly see that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than can its having its three angles equal to two right angles be separated from the essence of a rectilinear triangle, or the idea of a mountain from the idea of a valley; and so there is not any less repugnance to our conceiving God (that is, a Being supremely perfect) to whom existence is lacking (that is to say, to whom a certain perfection is lacking), than to conceive of a mountain which has no valley.

[3] But although I cannot really conceive of a God without existence any more than a mountain without a valley, still from the fact that I conceive of a mountain with a valley, it does not follow that there is such a mountain in the world; similarly, although I conceive God as possessing existence, it would seem that it does not follow that there is a God who exists, so I could perhaps attribute existence to God, although no God existed.

[4] But a sophism is concealed in this objection; for from the fact that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that there is any mountain or any valley in existence, but only that the mountain and the valley, whether they exist or do not exist, cannot in any way be separated one from the other. While from the fact that I cannot conceive God without existence, it follows that existence is inseparable from Him, and hence that He really exists; not that my thought can bring this to pass, or impose any necessity on things, but, on the contrary, because the necessity which lies in the thing itself; i.e., the necessity of the existence of God determines me to think in this way. For it is not within my power to think of God without existence (that is, of a supremely perfect Being devoid of a supreme perfection) though it is in my power to imagine a horse with wings or without wings.

[5] I discern in many ways that this idea [of God] is not something factitious and depending solely on my thought, but that it is the image of a true and immutable nature; first of all, because I cannot conceive anything but God himself to whose essence existence necessarily pertains; in the second place because it is not possible for me to conceive two or more Gods in this same position; and, granted that there is one such God who now exists, I see clearly that it is necessary that He should have existed from all eternity; and finally, because I know an infinitude of other properties in God, none of which I can either diminish or change.

[R. Descartes, fifth Meditation. French original in C.Adam & P.Tarmery, Oeuvres de Descartes (repr. Paris: Vrin, 1964-75), vol. VII. Eng. transl. E.S.Haldane & G.R.T. Ross (revised ed., Cambridge University Press, 1934), vol. I. This extract from Haldane & Ross's translation is also in A. Plantinga (ed.), The Ontological Argument (London: Macmillan & Co., 1968), pp. 31-4. Paragraph numbers added.]

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DESCARTES' ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

We may state Descartes' argument as follows (see **Document 2, paras 1 & 4**):

(D1) The concept of God is the concept of a being who possesses every perfection.
(D2) Existence is a perfection.
(D3) Therefore, the concept of God is the concept of a being who possesses existence.
(D4) Therefore, existence is inseparable from God.
(D5) Therefore, God really exists.

Almost everybody who reads this argument senses that there must be a trick in it. If there is, it does not follow that there is nothing to be learned from it.

Exercise
Please note down what you take to be the disputable points in the argument.

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THE MOVE FROM (D4) TO (D5)
We need to ask what it means to say (D4) that 'Existence is inseparable from God.' Whatever it means, it ought to be something that follows from Descartes' earlier moves.

(D4) could, taken by itself, be a remark about God himself. It could, for example, be a way of saying that God exists without beginning or end. But if it were taken as a remark about God himself, it would not follow from (D3), which is about the *concept* of God.

(D3) must be read in a way that does not involve reference to a being who actually exists—if it did, Descartes would not need (D4). In (D3) the expression 'of a being who possesses existence' must be read as an expression helping to specify the concept of God, and not as implying a relation between the concept and some existent being or other: cf 'This is a picture of a unicorn.' If one's concept of God is to be a concept of *God* at all, it must be, in the sense just explained, be the concept of a being who possesses existence. In the same way, in the sentence 'The concept of a triangle is the concept of a figure whose internal angles total 180 degrees,' the expression 'of a figure whose internal angles total 180 degrees' must be understood as a further specification of the concept of a triangle. Given this clarification, the question now facing us is this: if the concept of God is the concept of a being who possesses existence, does it follow that God actually exists? Descartes thought so, which is why he asserted (D5) on the basis of (D4).

Exercise
The move from (D4) to (D5) can be supported by the following argument: if (D4) is true, then atheism ('God does not exist') is incoherent, and theism ('God exists') is logically obligatory. If it cannot be coherently denied that God exists, doesn't it follow that he does? Give your views on this argument.

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KANT'S CRITICISMS
Please read **Document 3**, which consists of extracts from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*:

> [1] In all ages men have spoken of an absolutely necessary being, and in doing so have endeavoured, not so much to understand whether or how a thing of this kind allows even of being thought, but rather to prove its existence. There is, of course, no difficulty in giving a verbal definition of the concept, namely, that it is something the nonexistence of which is impossible. But this yields no insight into the conditions which make it necessary to regard the nonexistence of a thing as absolutely unthinkable.

It is precisely those conditions that we desire to know, in order that we may determine whether or not, in resorting to this concept, we are thinking anything at all. The expedient of removing all those conditions which the understanding indispensably requires in order to regard something as necessary, simply through the introduction of the word unconditioned, is very far from sufficing to show whether I am still thinking anything in the concept of the unconditionally necessary, or perhaps nothing at all.

[2] Nay more, this concept, at first ventured upon blindly, and now become so completely familiar, has been supposed to have its meaning exhibited in a number of examples; and on this account all further inquiry into its intelligibility has seemed to be quite needless. Thus the fact that every geometrical proposition, as, for instance, that a triangle has three angles, is absolutely necessary, has been taken as justifying us in speaking of an object which lies entirely outside the sphere of our understanding as if we understood perfectly what it is that we intend to convey by the concept of that object.

[3] All the alleged examples are, without exception, taken from judgments, not from things and their existence. But the unconditioned necessity of judgments is not the same as an absolute necessity of things. The absolute necessity of the judgment is only a conditional necessity of the thing, or of the predicate in the judgment. The above proposition does not declare that three angles are absolutely necessary, but that, under the condition that there is a triangle (that is, that a triangle is given), three angles will necessarily be found in it. So great, indeed, is the deluding influence exercised by this logical necessity that, by the simple device of forming an a priori concept of a thing in such a manner as to include existence within the scope of its meaning, we have supposed ourselves to have justified the conclusion that because existence necessarily belongs to the object of this concept - always under the condition that we posit the thing as given (as existing) - we are also of necessity, in accordance with the law of identity, required to posit the existence of its object, and that this being is therefore itself absolutely necessary - and this, to repeat, for the reason that the existence of this being has already been thought in a concept which is assumed arbitrarily and on condition that we posit its object.

[4] If, in an identical proposition, I reject the predicate while retaining the subject, contradiction results; and I therefore say that the former belongs necessarily to the latter. But if we reject subject and predicate alike, there is no contradiction; for nothing is then left that can be contradicted. To posit a triangle, and yet to reject its three angles, is self-contradictory; but there is no contradiction in rejecting the triangle together with its three angles. The same holds true of the concept of an absolutely necessary being. If its existence is rejected, we reject the thing itself with all its predicates; and no question of contradiction can then arise. There is nothing outside it that would then be contradicted, since the necessity of the thing is not supposed to be derived from anything external; nor is there anything internal that would be contradicted, since in rejecting the thing itself we have at the same time rejected all its internal properties. ‘God is omnipotent’ is a necessary judgment. The omnipotence cannot be rejected if we posit a Deity, that is, an infinite being; for the two concepts are identical. But if we say, ‘There is no God,’ neither the omnipotence nor any other of its predicates is given; they are one and all rejected together with the subject, and there is therefore not the least contradiction in such a judgment.

[5] We must ask: Is the proposition that this or that thing (which, whatever it may be, is allowed as possible) exists, an analytic or a synthetic proposition? If it is analytic, the assertion of the existence of the thing adds nothing to the thought of the thing; but in that case either the thought, which is in us, is the thing itself; or we have presupposed an existence as belonging to the realm of the possible, and have then, on that pretext,

inferred its existence from its internal possibility - which is nothing but a miserable tautology. The word ‘reality,’ which in the concept of the thing sounds other than the word ‘existence’ in the concept of the predicate, is of no avail in meeting this objection. For if all positing (no matter what it may be that is posited) is entitled reality, the thing with all its predicates is already posited in the concept of the object, and is assumed as actual; and in the predicate this is merely repeated. But if, on the other hand, we admit, as every reasonable person must, that all existential propositions are synthetic, how can we profess to maintain that the predicate of existence cannot be rejected without contradiction? This is a feature which is found only in analytic propositions, and is indeed precisely what constitutes their analytic character.

[6] ‘Being’ is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations, as existing in themselves. Logically, it is merely the copula of a judgment. The proposition, ‘God is omnipotent’ contains two concepts, each of which has its object -God and omnipotence. The small world ‘is’ adds no new predicate, but only serves to posit the predicate in its relation to the subject. If now, we take the subject (God) with all its predicates (among which is omnipotence), and say ‘God is,’ or ‘There is a God,’ we attach no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates, and indeed posit it as being an object that stands in relation to my concept. The content of both must be one and the same; nothing can have been added to the concept, which expresses merely what is possible, by my thinking its object (through the expression ‘it is’) as given absolutely. Otherwise stated, the real contains no more than the merely possible. A hundred real thalers do not contain the least coin more than a hundred possible thalers. For as the latter signify the concept, and the former the object and the positing of the object, should the former contain more than the latter, my concept would not, in that case, express the whole object, and would not therefore be an adequate concept of it. My financial position is, however, affected very differently by a hundred real thalers than it is by the mere concept of them (that is, of their possibility). For the object, as it actually exists, is not analytically contained in my concept but is added to my concept (which is a determination of my state) synthetically; and yet the conceived hundred thalers are not themselves in the least increased through thus acquiring existence outside my concept.

[7] By whatever and by however many predicates we may think a thing - even if we completely determine it - we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing is. Otherwise, it would not be exactly the same thing that exists, but something more than we had thought in the concept; and we could not, therefore, say that the exact object of my concept exists. On the contrary, it exists with the same defect with which I have thought it, since otherwise what exists would be different from what I thought. When, therefore, I think a being as the supreme reality, without any defect, the question still remains whether it exists or not.

(Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B620-8. Eng. transl. by N. Kemp Smith, Immanuel Kant 's Critique of Pure Reason (London: Macmillan & Co., 1964), pp. 501-6. This extract also in A. Plantinga (ed.), The Ontological Argument (London: Macmillan & Co., 1968), pp. 57-62. Paragraph numbers added.)

Kant’s argument against a Cartesian ontological argument may be presented as proceeding in two stages (although he himself argued in the reverse order):

• **Stage 1:** attack Descartes’ (D2), the claim that existence is a perfection;

• **Stage 2:** argue that, *even if* existence is a perfection and, consequently, ‘God exists’ is a necessary truth, it *still* doesn’t follow that God actually exists.

STAGE 1

Kant argues that 'being' (sc. 'existence') is not a *real predicate*, because to say 'X exists' adds nothing to the concept of X. So if I say 'God exists', I am not adding any perfection to the concept of God. See **Document 3, para. [6].**

Kant's way of arguing that 'exists' is not a real predicate (or that existence is not a real property) has been effectively criticized: see **Document 4**:

> [Kant] argues that if 'exists' were a real predicate, then in asserting that something exists, we would be altering our concept of that something, thereby ending up with a different concept from the one we started with. Since we now have a new and different concept, we will have failed to assert existence of the original subject. Thus, if 'exists' were a predicate, 'we could not, therefore, say that the exact object of my concept exists.' But since we obviously can say that, we cannot be adding anything to the concept of the subject when we say that the subject exists, and there fore 'exists' cannot be a real predicate.
> [2] It is astonishing that this argument has stood up for so long. For the argument, if sound, shows that nothing could be a real predicate. Suppose I wish to say that something is red, where 'red' is intended as a real predicate. In asserting that the thing is red, I would be adding to the concept of the thing, and hence would be unable to say that the object, as originally conceived is red, that 'the exact object of my concept' is red. The argument which shows that 'exists' is not a real predicate also shows that nothing could be one.
> (J Shaffer, 'Existence, Predication and the Ontological Argument', Mind n.s.LXXI (1962). Repr. in J .Hick & A.McGill (eds.), The Many-Faced Argument (London: Macmillan & Co., 1968), pp. 226-45. The above extract (paragraph numbers added) is on p.229.)

However, there are more modern ways of criticizing Descartes' (D2). The general theme is that sentences used to make statements of existence (and of non-existence) have a *grammatical* but not a *logical* subject-predicate character. Thus the sentence 'Unicorns exist' has a grammatical subject and predicate, but its logic is different. It does not say anything about unicorns; it does not attribute any property to them. Logically speaking, it is about the *concept* 'unicorn', and says that it has at least one instance.

Exercise

Consider 'Unicorns exist' and 'Tigers exist': formulate an argument to show that neither can be read as saying something about unicorns and tigers respectively. If 'X(es) exist' does not say anything about Xes, what follows for the thesis that existence is a perfection?

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STAGE 2

In **Document 3, paras 3-**4, Kant argues that a move such as that from (D4) to (D5) is fallacious. His argument rests on a general analysis of necessary truths. He takes as his example the necessary truth 'A triangle has three angles.' The necessity of the proposition has been taken to express the necessity of the existence of a three-angled object in some realm beyond our understanding. This is a mistake, because

> The above proposition does not declare that three angles are absolutely necessary, but that, under the condition that there is a triangle (that is, that a triangle is given), three angles will necessarily be found in it. (para.3)

In other words, what the proposition says is that, *if* a triangle exists, it has three angles; or that, *if* a thing is a triangle, then it has three angles. No necessary existence is asserted. How does this apply to the case of God?

Let us suppose that existence necessarily belongs to the concept of God. So it is a necessary truth that God exists. In Kant's terminology, 'God exists' expresses an 'identical proposition'—what we would call a tautology—because existence is included within the meaning of the concept of God. Kant then proceeds:

> If, in an identical proposition, I reject the predicate while retaining the subject, contradiction results; and I therefore say that the former belongs necessarily to the latter. But if we reject subject and predicate alike, there is no contradiction; for nothing is then left that can be contradicted. ... If the existence [of an absolutely necessary being] is rejected, we reject the thing itself with all its predicates; and no question of contradiction can then arise. ... if we say, 'There is no God,' neither the omnipotence nor any other of its predicates is given; they are one and all rejected together with the subject, and there is therefore not the least contradiction in such a judgment. (**para.4**)

Exercise

Please read **Document 5:** do you consider that this attack on Kant is successful?

> I think that Caterus, Kant, and numerous other philosophers have been mistaken in supposing that the proposition 'God is a necessary being' (or 'God necessarily exists') is equivalent to the conditional proposition 'If God exists then He necessarily exists.' For how do they want the antecedent clause, 'If God exists,' to be understood? Clearly they want it to imply that it is possible that God does not exist. The whole point of Kant's analysis is to try to show it is possible to 'reject the subject'. Let us make this implication explicit in the conditional proposition, so that it reads: 'If God exists (and it is possible that He does not) then He necessarily exists.' But now it is apparent, I think, that these philosophers have arrived at a self-contradictory position. I do not mean that this conditional proposition, taken alone, is self-contradictory. Their position is self-contradictory in the following way. On the one hand they agree that the proposition 'God necessarily exists' is an a priori truth; Kant implies that it is 'absolutely necessary,' and Caterus says that God's existence is implied by his very name. On the other hand, they think that it is correct to analyze this proposition in such a way that it will entail the proposition 'It is possible that God does not exist.' But so far from its being the case that the proposition 'God necessarily exists' entails the proposition 'It is possible that God does not exist,' it is rather the case that they are incompatible with one another! Can anything be clearer than that the conjunction 'God necessarily exists but it is possible that He does not exist' is self-contradictory?
> (N .Malco1m, 'Anse1m's Ontological Arguments', The Philosophical Review LXIX (1960); repr. in A.Plantinga (ed.), The Ontological Argument (London & Melbourne, 1968), and in J.Hick & A.McGill (eds), The Many-Faced Argument (London & Melboume, 1968). This extract in Plantinga (ed.), pp. 154-6, and in Hick & McGill, pp. 316-7.)

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Malcolm maintains in **Document 5** that the conjunction 'God necessarily exists but it is possible that He does not exist' is self-contradictory. A standard response goes as follows: it is indeed self-contradictory, *provided that each conjunct is taken in its conceptual sense*. But

if the first conjunct has its conceptual sense and the second does not, then there is no contradiction. However, this distinction of senses needs elucidation.

A good example of the standard response is Jerome Shaffer's article 'Existence, Predication and the Ontological Argument' (*Mind* n.s. LXXI (1962)). Shaffer points out that the sentence 'God exists' can be used to make the point 'that being an existent is a logical requirement for being God.' In this case it expresses a point about a component of the concept of God. Shaffer says that thus used it expresses a tautology. But it can also be used non-tautologically, to say that there is some being that satisfies the requirements for being God. That *this* is so cannot be established simply by examining the logical requirements for being God. So the conjunction that Malcolm attacks as self-contradictory is in fact self-consistent, if we read the first conjunct in its conceptual or tautological sense, and the second as stating the possibility that the logical requirements for being God are not satisfied by anything.

MALCOLM'S ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

In 1960 discussion of the Ontological Argument was revived by Norman Malcolm, who presented what he claimed to be a second Ontological Argument, contained in the 3rd chapter of Anselm's *Proslogion*. Unlike the argument of *Proslogion* ch.2, this one did not rely on the principle 'Existence is a perfection'; rather, it used the principle '*Absolutely unlimited* existence is a perfection.' A being possessing absolutely unlimited existence is one whose existence and activities could not be limited by, or depend on, anything outside itself. God is conceived as having such an existence. It follows from this, Malcolm claims, that God exists, and necessarily. That is, God exists and cannot but exist.

Exercise

Please read **Document 6**. Assuming that there are no logical absurdities in the concept of God, do you think that the conclusion 'God necessarily exists' follows validly from the premises? And do you think that the conclusion 'God necessarily exists' can amount to more than 'God exists' in its conceptual sense (see Shaffer's response to Malcolm above)?

> Let me summarize the proof. If God, a being a greater than which cannot be conceived, does not exists then He cannot come into existence. For if He did He would either have been caused to come into existence or have happened to come into existence, and in either case He would be a limited being, which by our conception of Him He is not. Since He cannot come into existence, if He does not exist His existence is impossible. If He does exist He cannot have come into existence (for the reasons given), nor can He cease to exist, for nothing could cause Him to cease to exist nor could it just happen that He ceased to exist. So if God exists His existence is necessary. Thus God's existence is either impossible or necessary. It can be the former only if the concept of such a being is self-contradictory or in some way logically absurd. Assuming that this is not so, it follows that He necessarily exists.
> (N .Malcolm, 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments', The Philosophical Review LXIX (1960); repr. in A.Plantinga (ed.), The Ontological Argument (London & Melbourne, 1968), and in J.Hick & A.McGill (eds), The Many-Faced Argument (London & Melbourne, 1968). This extract in Plantinga (ed.), p. 146, and in Hick & McGill, p. 309.)

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MALCOLM'S FAULTY LOGIC

Malcolm identifies as a feature of Anselm's concept of God the principle that God's existence is absolutely unlimited. Then he argues as follows:

If God [ever] does not exist, then it is [logically] impossible that He should [ever] exist.

But if God [ever] exists, then it is [logically] impossible that he should [ever] not exist (i.e., His existence is logically necessary).

The reason is the same in both cases: to claim that there is a time at which God does not exist, and a time at which He does is implicitly to deny, self-contradictorily, that His existence is unlimited.

But what Malcolm should have said is this:

It is logically impossible that God should exist at one time but not at another.

This will not enable him to deduce that God's existence is impossible or necessary. The mistake that he has made is exemplified by the following invalid reasoning:

If I know that something is the case, then it *must be true* that it is the case;

Therefore, if I know that something is the case, the statement that it is the case is a *necessary truth*.

For a more detailed statement of this objection see Plantinga (1961).

'THIS LANGUAGE-GAME IS PLAYED'

Some philosophers (notably Findlay (1955)) have opposed Malcolm on the ground that all propositions of the form '... exists' are logically contingent: i.e., they state something which, logically speaking, *happens* to be true if it is true; not something that logically *must* be true. So the concept of a God who has logically necessary existence is incoherent.

Against this Malcolm claims that the status of 'God exists' within Christianity and Judaism is a counter-example to the thesis that all propositions of the form '... exists' are logically contingent. In a famous passage he writes:

> In the Ninetieth Psalm it is said: 'Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.' Here is expressed the idea of the necessary existence and eternity of God, an idea that is essential to the Jewish and Christian religions. In those complex systems of thought, those 'language-games,' God has the status of a necessary being. Who can doubt that? Here we must say with Wittgenstein, 'This language-game is played!' I believe we may rightly take the existence of those religious systems of thought in which God figures as a necessary being to be a disproof of the dogma, affirmed by Hume and others, that no existential proposition can be necessary.

Malcolm's reading of the Psalm has been challenged. But he has another reason for saying that within the Jewish and Christian religions (and no doubt in Islam as well) God has the status of a necessary being. This reason is the obvious absurdity, within those religions, of questions such as 'How long has God existed?', 'Will God still exist next week?', and so on. Some such questions were not absurd within Greek polytheism, for example, most of whose gods had genealogies. The principle that necessarily, God has unlimited existence enables Malcolm to explain why these questions are absurd, even if it does not enable him to prove that God necessarily exists.

Malcolm's emphasis on God's necessarily unlimited existence is echoed in **Document 7**, which you should now read.

> [1] The religious nature of the thinking which underlies the various versions of the ontological argument becomes apparent when we reflect on the way God is conceived in the argument. Although in Anselm's famous definition, God is spoken of as that than which nothing greater (or more perfect) can be imagined, we have to ask ourselves what

underlies the relevant notion of greatness or perfection. It is abundantly clear in Anselm himself as well as in other versions of the argument, that the perfection intended in the case of God is the perfection of a different type of existence from any other thing. God is conceived as having a type of existence which is entirely unlimited by contingency or dependence of any sort, and this clearly has to be something quite different from anything we encounter in normal experience. Everything we encounter in normal experience is determined, limited, questionable in some way as to its cause or the reason for it to be as it is. It is easy to see how the idea of perfect, non-contingent existence begins to be assimilated to the notion of pure existence, uncontaminated by any determination or limitation whatever, and consequently by any concept whatever, for all concepts are products of the human mind and hence, in religious thinking, often regarded as therefore limiting the things of which they are predicated.

[2] It does seem possible that those who would put God beyond being and conceptualization, and those who are attracted to the reasoning underlying the ontological argument are trying to express much the same thought: that God has a type of existence which is totally beyond what is possessed by any created thing, and that created things are less real than absolute being This placing of God beyond finite reality in a way we can only gesture at is surely what is intended by the introduction of the notion of existence into the definition of God (and into nothing else), and even more by the application to God of the concept of necessary existence.

(A. O'Hear, Experience, Explanation and Faith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp.l44, 147. Paragraph numbers added.)

NECESSARY EXISTENCE

Sentences such as 'God necessarily exists' and 'God has necessary existence' may be intended in a number of ways:

• as making a conceptual claim, to the effect that the concept of God is the concept *of* a being who exists, or whose existence has a certain character, where the 'of' is understood as having a descriptive, not a referential, sense. See p.2 above, 'The Move from D(4) to D(5)';

• as making an allegedly undeniable existential claim. Is the existence of God undeniable *within* religion; or are there independent reasons for asserting his existence as an undeniable state of affairs?

• as making a claim about God, whose existence is presupposed.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION FOR?

Malcolm's allusion to Wittgenstein ('This language-game is played!') implies a radically different type of philosophy of religion, which treats as its data all the human phenomena that express religious convictions: not merely what people say when required to give explicit statements of their beliefs, but their immediate and unconsidered ways of feeling, desiring and acting. Its task is primarily to understand those interlocking phenomena, rather than to assess them against the standards of empirical or scientific rationality. For more about this new conception of the philosophy of religion, see Phillips (1981), ch.1.

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INTERNET RESOURCE
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ontological-arguments