

1Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2005  
Russell Marcus, Instructor  
email: [philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org](mailto:philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org)  
website: <http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org>  
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

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## I. Descartes' ontological argument

Descartes' version of the argument is simpler than Anselm's.

Anselm argued that the object which corresponds to the concept 'something greater than which can not be thought' must exist.

For, if we thought that the object which corresponded to that concept did not exist, then it would not be the object which corresponded to that concept.

There would be something greater, i.e. the object which does exist.

So, we give the name 'God' to that best possible object.

Descartes' version does not depend on our conception, our ability to conceive.

He merely notes that existence is part of the essence of 'God', pp 65-66.

This is similar to the way that having angles whose measures add up to 180 degrees is part of the essence of a 'triangle'.

Or, as Descartes notes, like a mountain necessarily has a valley.

The essence of an object is all the properties that necessarily belong to that object.

They are the necessary and sufficient conditions for being that object, or one of that type.

Something that has all these properties is one.

Something that lacks any of these properties is not one.

A chair's essence (approximately): furniture for sitting, has a back, furniture, durable material.

Bachelor: unmarried man.

A human person: body and mind.

God: three omni's, and existence.

## II. Some problems with 'God'

1) Evil, which seems to conflict with omni-benevolence.

2) Error, which seems to conflict with omnipotence.

3) Free will, which seems to conflict with omniscience.

Another problem with omni-benevolence, from Leibniz:

1) God is omnipotent so he can create the best possible world.

2) God is omni-benevolent, so he wants to create the best possible world.

3) The world exists.

So, this is the best of all possible worlds.

A corollary:

If this is the best of all possible worlds, then all of the evil in it is necessary.

### III. Kant's objection to the ontological argument

Kant claims that existence is not a predicate.

That is, existence is not a property, the way that the perfections are properties.

So, the form of this argument is wrong.

Existence can not be part of an essence, since it is not a property.

Hume made, essentially, this criticism prior to Kant, but Kant gets the credit.

Kant's support for his assertion, that existence is not a predicate, is thin.

He relies on the belief that logic should make no existence assertions.

In many cases this is true.

But Descartes (and Anslem) might respond that this is an exception to that rule.

We shall put the objections aside, and for the purposes of understanding the remainder of the work, accept that Descartes has established the existence of God.

### IV. From where does the idea of God come?

Descartes urges that the idea of God is imprinted on him, as a mark of the artist on his work, p 51.

Remember that there are three types of ideas, according to Descartes:

1. Innate
2. Acquired
3. Produced by me

We have freedom to create ideas of the third type any way we wish, so the idea of God can not be produced by me.

And the idea of God can not be acquired, since we have no sensory experience of God.

So, the idea of God must be innate.