

start → The preceding two paragraphs lead to this conclusion: The mere fact that I find in my thought an idea of something x, and vividly and clearly perceive x to have a certain property, it follows that x really does have that property. Can I not turn this to account in a second argument to prove the existence of God? The idea of God (that is, of a supremely perfect being) is certainly one that I find within me, just as I find the ideas of shapes and numbers; and I understand from this idea that it belongs to God's nature that *he always exists*. This understanding is just as vivid and clear as what is involved in mathematical proofs of the properties of shapes and numbers. So even if I have sometimes gone wrong in my meditations in these past days, I ought still to regard the existence of God as being at least as certain as I have taken the truths of mathematics to be.

At first sight, this looks like a trick. Where things other than God are involved, I have been accustomed to distinguish a thing's existence from its essence. The question 'What is the *essence* of triangles (or flames or sparrows)?' asks what it takes for something to qualify as a triangle (or flame or sparrow). Answering this still leaves open the *existence* question, which asks whether there are any triangles (or flames or sparrows). I can easily believe that in the case of God, also, existence can be separated from essence, letting us answer the 'essence' question about God while leaving the 'existence' question open, so that God can be thought of as not existing. But on more careful reflection it becomes quite evident that, just as having-internal-angles-equal-to-180° can't be separated from the idea or essence of a triangle, and as the idea of highlands can't be separated from the idea of lowlands, so existence can't be separated from the essence of God. Just as it is self-contradictory to think of *highlands in a world where there are no lowlands*, so it is self-contradictory to think of *God as not existing*—that is, to

think of a supremely perfect being as lacking a perfection, namely the perfection of existence. [What Descartes wrote is usually translated as 'mountains in a world where there are no valleys', but that is *obviously* not self-contradictory. The Latin provides no escape from this, but Descartes may have been thinking in French, in which *vallée* can mean 'valley' in our sense but can be used to refer to foothills, the lower slopes of a mountain, or the plain immediately surrounding the mountain. So 'highlands'/'lowlands' has been adopted as a compromise: compact and fairly close to what he presumably meant.]

Here is a possible objection to the preceding two paragraphs:

I can't think of God except as existing, just as I can't think of a river without banks. From the latter fact, though, it certainly doesn't follow that there are any rivers in the world; so why should it follow from the former fact that God exists? How things are in reality is not settled by my thought; and just as I can imagine a winged horse even though no horse has wings, so I can attach existence to God in my thought even if no God exists.

This involves false reasoning. From the fact that I can't think of a river without banks, it does not follow that a river with banks exists anywhere, but simply that *river* and *banks*—whether or not there are any in reality—are inseparable. On the other hand, from the fact that I can't think of God except as existing it follows that *God* and *existence* are inseparable, which is to say that God really exists. My thought doesn't make it so; it doesn't create necessities. The influence runs the opposite way: the necessity of the thing constrains how I can think, depriving me of the freedom to think of God without existence (that is, a supremely perfect being without a supreme perfection), like my freedom to imagine a horse with or without wings.

Here is a further possible objection to this line of thought:

Admittedly, once I have supposed that all perfections belong to God, I must suppose that he exists, because existence is one of the perfections. But what entitles me to suppose God to have all perfections? Similarly, if I suppose that all quadrilaterals can be inscribed in a circle, I have to conclude that a rhombus can be inscribed in a circle; but that is plainly false, which shows that the original supposition was wrong.

I agree that I don't have to think about God at all; but whenever I do choose to think of him, bringing the idea of *the first and supreme being* out of my mind's store, I *must* attribute all perfections to him, even if I don't attend to them individually straight away. This necessity in my thought guarantees that, when I later realize that existence is a perfection, I am right to conclude then that the first and supreme being exists. Similarly, I don't ever have to imagine a triangle; but whenever I do wish to consider a figure with straight sides and three angles, I *must* attribute to it properties from which it follows that its three angles equal no more than 180°, even if I don't notice this at the time. When on the other hand I examine what figures can be inscribed in a circle, I am not compelled to think that this class includes all quadrilaterals. Indeed, I cannot—while thinking vividly and clearly—even *pretend* that all quadrilaterals can be inscribed in a circle. This kind of false pretence is vastly different from the true ideas that are innate in me, of which the first and chief is the idea of God. This idea isn't a fiction, a creature of my thought, but rather an image of a true and unchanging nature; and I have several indications that this is so. God is the only thing I can think of whose existence necessarily belongs to its essence. I can't make sense of there being two or more Gods of this kind; and after supposing that

one God exists, I plainly see that it is necessary that he has existed from eternity and will stay in existence for eternity.

I perceive many other attributes of God, none of which I can remove or alter.

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