

Selected Readings on the Ontological Argument

Anselm, from *Proslogion*

Chapter 2: That God Really Exists

Therefore, Lord, you who give knowledge of the faith, give me as much knowledge as you know to be fitting for me, because you are as we believe and that which we believe. And indeed we believe you are something greater than which cannot be thought. Or is there no such kind of thing, for “the fool said in his heart, ‘there is no God’” (Ps. 13:1, 52:1)? But certainly that same fool, having heard what I just said, “something greater than which cannot be thought,” understands what he heard, and what he understands is in his thought, even if he does not think it exists. For it is one thing for something to exist in a person’s thought and quite another for the person to think that thing exists. For when a painter thinks ahead to what he will paint, he has that picture in his thought, but he does not yet think it exists, because he has not done it yet. Once he has painted it he has it in his thought and thinks it exists because he has done it. Thus even the fool is compelled to grant that something greater than which cannot be thought exists in thought, because he understands what he hears, and whatever is understood exists in thought. And certainly that greater than which cannot be understood cannot exist only in thought, for if it exists only in thought it could also be thought of as existing in reality as well, which is greater. If, therefore, that than which greater cannot be thought exists in thought alone, then that than which greater cannot be thought turns out to be that than which something greater actually can be thought, but that is obviously impossible. Therefore something than which greater cannot be thought undoubtedly exists both in thought and in reality.

Chapter 3: That God Cannot be Thought Not to Exist

In fact, it so undoubtedly exists that it cannot be thought of as not existing. For one can think there exists something that cannot be thought of as not existing, and that would be greater than something which can be thought of as not existing. For if that greater than which cannot be thought can be thought of as not existing, then that greater than which cannot be thought is not that greater than which cannot be thought, which does not make sense. Thus that than which nothing can be thought so undoubtedly exists that it cannot even be thought of as not existing.

And you, Lord God, are this being. You exist so undoubtedly, my Lord God, that you cannot even be thought of as not existing. And deservedly, for if some mind could think of something greater than you, that creature would rise above the creator and could pass judgment on the creator, which is absurd. And indeed whatever exists except you alone can be thought of as not existing. You alone of all things most truly exists and thus enjoy existence to the fullest degree of all things, because nothing else exists so undoubtedly, and thus everything else enjoys being in a lesser degree. Why therefore did the fool say in his heart “there is no God,” since it is so evident to any rational mind that you above all things exist? Why indeed, except precisely because he is stupid and foolish?

Chapter 4: How the Fool Managed to Say in His Heart That Which Cannot be Thought

How in the world could he have said in his heart what he could not think? Or how indeed could he not have thought what he said in his heart, since saying it in his heart is the same as thinking it? But if he really thought it because he said it in his heart, and did not say it in his heart because he could not possibly have thought it - and that seems to be precisely what happened - then there must be more than one way in which something can be said in one’s heart or thought. For a thing is thought in one way when the words signifying it are thought, and it is thought in quite another way when the thing signified is understood. God can be thought not to exist in the first way but not in the second. For no one who understands what God is can think that he does not exist. Even though he may say those words in his heart he will give them some other meaning or no meaning at all. For God is that greater than which cannot be thought. Whoever understands this also understands that God exists in such a way that one cannot even think of him as not existing.

Thank you, my good God, thank you, because what I believed earlier through your gift I now understand through your illumination in such a way that I would be unable not to understand it even if I did not want to believe you existed.

Gaunilo, "On Behalf of the Fool in Reply to Anselm"

To one who questions whether (or simply denies that) there exists something of such a nature that nothing greater can be imagined, it is said that its existence is proved in the first place by the fact that anyone denying it already has it in his thought, since upon hearing it said he understands what is said; and in the second place by the fact that what he understands necessarily exists not only in the mind but in reality as well. Thus its existence is proved, because it is a greater thing to exist in reality as well than to exist in the mind alone, and if it exists only in the mind, then what exists in reality as well will be greater, and thus that which is greater than all else will be less than something else and not greater than all else, which is nonsense. Thus what is greater than all else must necessarily exist, not only in the mind (which has already been acknowledged to be the case), in reality as well, or else it could not be greater than all else.

Contrasting Thinking with Understanding:

But perhaps the fool could reply that this thing is said to exist in my mind only in the sense that I understand what is said. For could I not say that all sorts of false and completely nonexistent things exist in my mind since when someone speaks of them I understand what is said? Unless perhaps what is being said here is that one entertains this particular thing in the mind in a completely different way than one thinks of false or doubtful things, and thus what is being said is that having heard this particular thing I do not merely think it but understand it, for I cannot think of this thing in any other way except by understanding it, and that means understanding with certainty that it actually exists. But if this is true, then in the first place there will be no difference between first entertaining that thing in the mind and then understanding that it exists. Imagine the case of that picture which is first in the painter's mind, then exists in reality. It seems unthinkable that, once such an object was spoken of the words heard, the object could not be thought not to exist in the same way God can be thought not to exist. For if God cannot be thought not to exist, then what is the point of launching this whole argument against someone who might deny that something of such a nature actually exists? And in the second place, this basic notion - that God is such that, as soon as he is thought of, he must be perceived by the mind as unquestionably existing - this notion, I say, must be proved to me by some unquestionable argument, but not by the one offered here, namely that this must be in my understanding because I understand

what I'm hearing. For as far as I am concerned one might say the same thing about other things that are certain or even false, things about which I might be deceived (as I believe I often am).

Words Alone Can Not Impart Knowledge of God:

When I hear of something greater than all other things which can be thought of - and that something can be nothing other than God himself - I can no more entertain a thought of this being in terms of species or genera familiar to me than I can entertain such a thought of God himself, and for this reason I am able to think he does not exist. For I have not known the thing itself and I cannot form a similitude of it from other things. For if I hear about some man completely unknown to me, whom I do not even know exists, I could at least think about him through that specific and generic knowledge by which I know what a man is or what men are like. Yet it could be true that, because the speaker was lying, the man I thought about actually did not exist at all, even though I had thought of him as an existing thing, my idea of him being based, not on knowledge of this particular man, but on knowledge of man in general. But when I hear someone say "God" or "something greater than everything else" I cannot think of it as I thought of that nonexistent man, for I was able to think of the latter in terms of some truly existing thing known to me, while in the former case I can think only of the bare words, and on this basis alone one can seldom or never gain any true knowledge. For when one thinks in this way, one thinks not so much of the word itself - which, insofar as it is the sound of letters or syllables is itself a real thing, but of what is signified by the sound heard. But a phrase like "that which is greater than everything else" is not thought of as one thinks about words when one knows what they mean. It is not thought of, that is, as one thinks about something he knows is true either in reality or in thought alone. It is thought of, instead, as one does when he does not really know what the words mean, but thinks of it only in terms of an affection produced by the words within his soul, yet tries to imagine what the words mean. On this basis, though, it would be amazing if he was ever able to penetrate to the truth of the thing. It is in this way and only in this way that this being is in my mind when I hear and understand someone saying there is something greater than everything else that can be thought of. So much for the claim that the supreme nature already exists in my mind.

Anselm's Argument Presupposes the Reality of God:

Nevertheless, that this being must exist not only in my mind but in reality as well is proved to me by the following argument: If it did not, then whatever did exist in reality would be greater, and thus the thing which has already been proved to exist in my mind will not be greater than everything else. If it is said that this being, which cannot be conceived of in terms of any existing thing, exists in the mind, I do not deny that it exists in mine. But through this alone it can hardly be said to attain existence in reality. For whoever says that it must exist because otherwise that which is greater than all other beings will not be greater than all other beings, that person isn't paying careful enough attention to what he says. For I do not yet grant, in fact I deny it or at least question it, that the thing existing in my mind is greater than any real thing. Nor do I concede that it exists in any way except this: the sort of existence (if you can call it such) a thing has when the mind attempts to form some image of a thing unknown to it on the basis of nothing more than some words the person has heard. How then is it demonstrated to me that the thing exists in reality merely because it is said to be greater than everything else? For I continue to deny and doubt that this is established, since I continue to question whether this greater thing is in my mind or thought even in the way that many doubtful or unreal things are. It would first have to be proved to me that this greater thing really exists somewhere. Only then will we be able to infer from the fact that it is greater than everything else that it also subsists in itself.

The Most Perfect Island:

For example, they say there is in the ocean somewhere an island which, due to the difficulty (or rather the impossibility) of finding what does not actually exist, is called "the lost island." And they say that this island has all manner of riches and delights, even more of them than the Isles of the Blest, and having no owner or inhabitant it is superior in the abundance of its riches to all other lands which are inhabited by men. If someone should tell me that such is the case, I will find it easy to understand what he says, since there is nothing difficult about it. But suppose he then adds, as if he were stating a logical consequence, "Well then, you can no longer doubt that this island more excellent than all other lands really exists somewhere, since you do not doubt that it is in your mind; and since it is more excellent to exist

not only in the mind but in reality as well, this island must necessarily exist, because if it didn't, any other island really existing would be more excellent than it, and thus that island now thought of by you as more excellent will not be such." If, I say, someone tries to convince me through this argument that the island really exists and there should be no more doubt about it, I will either think he is joking or I will have a hard time deciding who is the bigger fool, me if I believe him or him if he thinks he has proved its existence without having first convinced me that this excellence is something undoubtedly existing in reality and not just something false or uncertain existing in my mind.

Contrasting the Idea of God with the Idea of One's Self:

In the meantime, this is how the fool answers. If it is asserted in the first place that this being is so great that its nonbeing is logically inconceivable (this in turn being proved by nothing except that otherwise it would not be greater than all other beings), then the fool can answer, "When did I say that such a being, namely one greater than all others, actually exists, thus allowing you to proceed from there to argue that it so really exists that its very nonexistence is inconceivable?" It should first be proved conclusively that some being superior to (that is, greater and better than) all others exists, so that on this basis we can go on to prove the attributes such a greater and better being must possess. When, however, it is said that this highest being cannot be thought of as not existing, perhaps it would have been better to say that its nonbeing or the possibility of its nonbeing is unintelligible. For strictly speaking false things are unintelligible even though they can be thought of in the same way the fool thought God did not exist. I am absolutely certain that I exist, although I nevertheless know that my nonexistence is possible. And I understand without doubting it that the highest thing there is, namely God, exists and cannot not exist. I do not know, however, whether I can think of myself as nonexistent when I know for certain that I exist. If it turns out that I can do so in this case, why should I not be able to do the same concerning other things I know with equal certainty? If I cannot, though, the impossibility of doing so will not be something peculiar to thinking about God.

Anselm's Reply to Gaunilo

We Do Have an Idea of God:

You say - whoever you are who claims that the fool can say these things - that something greater than which cannot be thought of is in the mind only as something that cannot be thought of in terms of some [existent thing known to us]. And you say that one can no more argue, "since a being greater than which cannot be thought of exists in my mind it must also exist in reality," than one can argue, "the lost island certainly exists in reality because when it is described in words the hearer has no doubt that it exists in his mind." I say in reply that if "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" is neither understood nor thought of, nor is it in our understanding or our thought, then God either is not that greater than which cannot be thought of or he is not understood or thought of, nor is he in the understanding or mind. In proving that this is false I appeal to your faith and conscience. Therefore "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" is really understood and thought of and it really is in our understanding and thought.

The Idea of Something Which Has No Beginning:

Moreover, you imagine that although "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" is understood, it does not follow that it exists in our understanding nor does it follow that, since it is in our understanding, it must exist in reality. I myself say with certainty that if such a being can even be thought of as existing, it must necessarily exist. For "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" cannot be thought of except as having no beginning; but whatever can be thought of as existing yet does not actually exist can be thought of as having a beginning. Therefore "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" cannot be thought of yet not actually exist. Therefore, if it can be thought of, it necessarily exists.

God's Existence Could Not Be Contingent:

Furthermore, if it can be thought of at all, it must necessarily exist. For no one who denies or doubts the existence of "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" denies or doubts that, if it did exist, it would be impossible for it not to exist either in reality or in the mind. Otherwise it would not be "a being greater than which cannot be thought of." But whatever can be thought of yet does not actually exist, could, if it did come to exist, not exist again in reality and in the mind. That is why, if it can even be thought of, "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" cannot be nonexistent.

God Must Exist Always and Everywhere:

I will go even farther. Without doubt whatever does not

exist somewhere or at some time, even if it does exist somewhere or at some time, can be thought of as capable of existing never and nowhere, just as it does not exist somewhere or at some time. For what did not exist yesterday and exists today can be thought of as never existing, just as it is thought of as not having existed yesterday. And what does not exist here but does exist somewhere else can be thought of as not existing anywhere. And it is the same with something some parts of which are absent at times. If that is the case, then all of its parts and thus the thing in its entirety can be thought of as existing never and nowhere. For if it is said that time always exists and the world is everywhere, it is nevertheless true that time as a whole does not exist forever, nor does the entire world exist everywhere. And if individual parts of time exist when other parts do not, they can be thought of as never existing at all. And just as particular parts of the world do not exist where other parts do, so they can be thought of as never existing at all, anywhere. And what is composed of parts can be broken up in the mind and be nonexistent. Thus whatever does not exist as a whole sometime or somewhere can be thought of as not existing, even if it actually exists at the moment. But "a being greater than which cannot be thought of," if it exists, cannot be thought of as not existing. Otherwise it is not "a being greater than which cannot be thought of," which is absurd. Thus it cannot fail to exist in its totality always and everywhere...

Accounting for the Disagreement:

You often picture me as offering this argument: Because what is greater than all other things exists in the understanding, it must also exist in reality or else the being which is greater than all others would not be such. Never in my entire treatise do I say this. For there is a big difference between saying "greater than all other things" and "a being greater than which cannot be thought of." If someone says "a being greater than which cannot be thought of" is not something actually existing or is something which could possibly not exist or something which cannot even be understood, such assertions are easily refuted. For what does not exist is capable of not existing, and what is capable of not existing can be thought of as not existing. But whatever can be thought of as not existing, if it does actually exist, is not "a being greater than which cannot be thought of."

It is not, it seems, so easy to prove the same thing of "that which is greater than all other things," for it is not all that obvious that something which can be thought of as not existing is not nevertheless greater than all things which actually exist.

Descartes's Ontological Argument
from Meditation Five

I discover in myself an infinitude of ideas of certain things which cannot be esteemed as pure negations, although they may possibly have no existence outside of my thought, and which are not framed by me, although it is within my power either to think or not to think them, but which possess natures which are true and immutable. For example, when I imagine a triangle, although there may nowhere in the world be such a figure outside my thought, or ever have been, there is nevertheless in this figure a certain determinate nature, form, or essence, which is immutable and eternal, which I have not invented, and which in no way depends on my mind, as appears from the fact that diverse properties of that triangle can be demonstrated, viz. that its three angles are equal to two right angles, that the greatest side is subtended by the greatest angle, and the like, which now, whether I wish it or do not wish it, I recognize very clearly as pertaining to it, although I never thought of the matter at all when I imagined a triangle for the first time, and which therefore cannot be said to have been invented by me.

Nor does the objection hold good that possibly this idea of a triangle has reached my mind through the medium of my senses, since I have sometimes seen bodies triangular in shape; because I can form in my mind an infinitude of other figures regarding which we cannot have the least conception of their ever having been objects of sense, and I can nevertheless demonstrate various properties pertaining to their nature as well as to that of the triangle, and these must certainly all be true since I conceive them clearly. Hence they are something, and not pure negation; for it is perfectly clear that all that is true is something, and I have already fully demonstrated that all that I know clearly is true. And even although I had not demonstrated this, the nature of my mind is such that I could not prevent myself from holding them to be true so long as I conceive them clearly; and I recollect that even when I was still strongly attached to the objects of sense, I counted as the most certain those truths which I conceived clearly as regards figures, numbers, and the other matters which pertain to arithmetic and geometry, and, in general, to pure and abstract mathematics.

But now, 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 (which concern only numbers and figures) to be.

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 a 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.

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 of God as possessing existence, it would seem that it does not follow that there is a God who exists; for my thought does not impose any necessity upon things, and just as I may imagine a winged horse, although no horse with wings exists, so I could perhaps attribute existence to God, although no God existed.

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 either with wings or without wings.

Caterus on the Ontological Argument
from *Objections and Replies* to Descartes's *Meditations*

From First Objections (Caterus, 99-100): **The ontological argument only establishes conceptual existence.**

Even if it is granted that a supremely perfect being carries the implication of existence in virtue of its very title, it still does not follow that the existence in question is anything actual in the real world. All that follows is that the concept of existence is inseparably linked to the concept of a supreme being. So you cannot infer that the existence of God is anything actual unless you suppose that the supreme being actually exists. Then it will actually contain all perfections, including the perfection of real existence.

Pardon me, gentlemen: I am now rather tired and propose to have a little fun. The complex 'existing lion' includes both 'lion' and 'existence', and it includes them essentially, for if you take away either element it will not be the same complex. But now, has not God had clear and distinct knowledge of this

composite from all eternity? And does not the idea of this composite, as a composite, involve both elements essentially? In other words, does not existence belong to the essence of the composite 'existing lion'?

Nevertheless the distinct knowledge of God, the distinct knowledge he has from eternity, does not compel either element in the composite to exist, unless we assume that the composite itself exists (in which case it will contain all its essential perfections including actual existence).

Similarly even if I have distinct knowledge of a supreme being, and even if the supremely perfect being includes existence as an essential part of the concept, it still does not follow that the existence in question is anything actual, unless we suppose that the supreme being exists (for in that case it will include actual existence along with all its other perfections).

Accordingly we must look elsewhere for a proof that the supremely perfect being exists.

Descartes's Reply to Caterus
from *Objections and Replies to Descartes's Meditations*

In the first place we are so accustomed to distinguishing existence from essence in the case of all other things that we fail to notice how closely existence belongs to essence in the case of God as compared with that of other things. Next, we do not distinguish what belongs to the true and immutable essence of a thing from what is attributed to it merely by a fiction of the intellect. So, even if we observe clearly enough that existence belongs to the essence of God, we do not draw the conclusion that God exists, because we do not know whether his essence is immutable and true, or merely invented by us.

To remove the first part of the difficulty we must distinguish between possible and necessary existence. It must be noted that possible existence is contained in the concept or idea of everything that we clearly and distinctly understand. But in no case is necessary existence so contained, except in the case of the idea of God. Those who carefully attend to this difference between the idea of God and every other idea will undoubtedly perceive that even though our understanding of other things always involves understanding them as if they were existing things, it does not follow that they do exist, but merely that they are capable of existing. For our understanding does not show us that it is necessary for actual existence to be conjoined with their other properties. But, from the fact that we understand that actual existence is necessarily and always conjoined with the other attributes of God, it certainly does follow that God exists.

To remove the second part of the difficulty, we must notice a point about ideas which do not contain true and immutable natures but merely ones which are invented and put together by the intellect. Such ideas can always be split up by the same intellect, not simply by an abstraction but by a clear and distinct intellectual operation. Any ideas which the intellect cannot split up in this way are clearly not put together by the intellect. When, for example, I think of a winged horse or an actually existing lion, or a triangle inscribed in a square, I readily understand that I am also able to think of a horse without wings, or a lion which does not exist, or a triangle apart from a square, and so on. Hence these things do not have true and immutable natures. But if I think of a triangle or a square, then whatever I apprehend as being contained in the idea of a triangle, for example that its three angles are equal to two right angles, I can with truth assert of the triangle. And the same applies to the square with respect to whatever I apprehend as being contained in the idea of a square. For even if I can understand what a triangle is if I

abstract the fact that its three angles are equal to two right angles, I cannot deny that this property applies to the triangle by a clear and distinct intellectual operation, that is, while at the same time understanding what I mean by my denial. Moreover, if I consider a triangle inscribed in a square, with a view not to attributing to the square properties that belong only to the triangle, or attributing to the triangle properties that belong to the square, but with a view to examining only the properties which arise out of the conjunction of the two, then the nature of this composite will be just as true and immutable as the nature of the triangle alone or the square alone. Hence it will be quite in order to maintain that the square is not less than double the area of the triangle inscribed within it, and to affirm other similar properties that belong to the nature of this composite figure.

Let us now take a thing, whatever this thing turns out to be, which possesses all the perfections which can exist together. If we ask whether existence should be included among these perfections, we will admittedly be in some doubt at first. For our mind, which is finite, normally thinks of these perfections only separately, and hence may not immediately notice the necessity of their being joined together. Yet if we attentively examine whether existence belongs to a supremely powerful being, and what sort of existence it is, we shall be able to perceive clearly and distinctly the following facts. First, possible existence, at the very least, belongs to such a being, just as it belongs to all the other things of which we have a distinct idea, even to those which are put together through a fiction of the intellect. Next, when we attend to the immense power of this being, we shall be unable to think of its existence as possible without also recognizing that it can exist by its own power. We shall infer from this that this being does really exist and has existed from eternity, since it is quite evident by the natural light that what can exist by its own power always exists. So we shall come to understand that necessary existence is contained in the idea of a supremely powerful being, not by any fiction of the intellect, but because it belongs to the true and immutable nature of such a being that it exists. And we shall also easily perceive that this supremely powerful being cannot but possess within it all the other perfections that are contained in the idea of God. Hence these perfections exist in God and are joined together not by any fiction of the intellect but by their very nature.

Hume on the Ontological Argument
from *Treatise on Human Nature*, Book I, Part II, §VI
“Of the Idea of Existence, and of External Existence”

There is no impression nor idea of any kind, of which we have any consciousness or memory, that is not conceived as existent; and it is evident that from this consciousness the most perfect idea and assurance of being is derived. From hence we may form a dilemma, the most clear and conclusive that can be imagined, viz. that since we never remember any idea or impression without attributing existence to it, the idea of existence must either be derived from a distinct impression, conjoined with every perception or object of our thought, or must be the very same with the idea of the perception or object.

As this dilemma is an evident consequence of the principle that every idea arises from a similar impression, so our decision betwixt the propositions of the dilemma is no more doubtful. So far from there being any distinct impression attending every impression and every idea that I do not think there are any two distinct impressions which are inseparably conjoined. Though certain sensations may at one time be united, we quickly find they admit of a separation, and may be presented apart. And thus, though every impression and idea we remember be considered as existent, the idea of existence is not derived from any particular impression.

The idea of existence, then, is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent. To reflect on any thing simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other. That idea, when conjoined with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it. Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent. Any idea we please to form is the idea of a being; and the idea of a being is any idea we please to form.

Whoever opposes this, must necessarily point

out that distinct impression from which the idea of entity is derived, and must prove that this impression is inseparable from every perception we believe to be existent. This we may without hesitation conclude to be impossible.

A like reasoning will account for the idea of external existence. We may observe, that it is universally allowed by philosophers, and is besides pretty obvious of itself, that nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas, and that external objects become known to us only by those perceptions they occasion. To hate, to love, to think, to feel, to see; all this is nothing but to perceive.

Now since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions, and since all ideas are derived from something antecedently present to the mind, it follows that it is impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions. Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: Let us chase our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appeared in that narrow compass. This is the universe of the imagination, nor have we any idea but what is there produced.

The farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when supposed specifically different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects. Generally speaking we do not suppose them specifically different; but only attribute to them different relations, connections and durations.

Kant on the Ontological Argument
from *Critique of Pure Reason*, A598/B626 - A601/B629
“The Impossibility of an Ontological Proof of the Existence of God”

I should have a reasonable hope of putting an end for ever to this sophistical mode of argumentation, by a strict definition of the conception of existence, did not my own experience teach me that the illusion arising from our confounding a logical with a real predicate (a predicate which aids in the determination of a thing) resists almost all the endeavors of explanation and illustration. A logical predicate may be what you please, even the subject may be predicated of itself; for logic pays no regard to the content of a judgement. But the determination of a conception is a predicate, which adds to and enlarges the conception. It must not, therefore, be contained in the conception.

Being is evidently not a real predicate, that is, a conception of something which is added to the conception of some other thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations in it. Logically, it is merely the copula of a judgement. The proposition, God is omnipotent, contains two conceptions, which have a certain object or content; the word is, is no additional predicate -- it merely indicates the relation of the predicate to the subject. Now, if I take the subject (God) with all its predicates (omnipotence being one), and say: God is, or, There is a God, I add no new predicate to the conception of God, I merely posit or affirm the existence of the subject with all its predicates - I posit the object in relation to my conception. The content of both is the same; and there is no addition made to the conception, which expresses merely the possibility of the object, by my thinking of the object (in the expression ‘it is’) as absolutely given or existing. Thus the real contains no more than the possible. A hundred real thalers contain no more than a hundred possible thalers. For, as the latter indicate the conception, and the former the object, on the supposition that the content of the former was greater than that of the latter, my conception would not be an expression of the whole object, and would consequently be an inadequate conception of it. But in reckoning my wealth there may be said to be more in a hundred real thalers than in a hundred possible thalers -- that is, in the mere conception of them. For the real object -- the thalers -- is not analytically contained in my conception,

but forms a synthetical addition to my conception (which is merely a determination of my mental state), although this objective reality -- this existence -- apart from my conceptions, does not in the least degree increase the aforesaid hundred thalers.

By whatever and by whatever number of predicates -- even to the complete determination of it -- I may cogitate a thing, I do not in the least augment the object of my conception by the addition of the statement: This thing exists. Otherwise, not exactly the same, but something more than what was cogitated in my conception, would exist, and I could not affirm that the exact object of my conception had real existence. If I cogitate a thing as containing all modes of reality except one, the mode of reality which is absent is not added to the conception of the thing by the affirmation that the thing exists; on the contrary, the thing exists -- if it exist at all -- with the same defect as that cogitated in its conception; otherwise not that which was cogitated, but something different, exists. Now, if I cogitate a being as the highest reality, without defect or imperfection, the question still remains -- whether this being exists or not? For, although no element is wanting in the possible real content of my conception, there is a defect in its relation to my mental state, that is, I am ignorant whether the cognition of the object indicated by the conception is possible a posteriori. And here the cause of the present difficulty becomes apparent. If the question regarded an object of sense merely, it would be impossible for me to confound the conception with the existence of a thing. For the conception merely enables me to cogitate an object as according with the general conditions of experience; while the existence of the object permits me to cogitate it as contained in the sphere of actual experience. At the same time, this connection with the world of experience does not in the least augment the conception, although a possible perception has been added to the experience of the mind. But if we cogitate existence by the pure category alone, it is not to be wondered at, that we should find ourselves unable to present any criterion sufficient to distinguish it from mere possibility.