The original version of the ontological argument for the existence of God is due to St. Anselm. He argued that God is, by definition, a being than which none greater can be conceived; that such a being exists at least in the mind of the conceiver, that is, in conception; that it is greater to exist in reality than to exist merely in conception; and hence that such a being does exist in reality. This argument speaks explicitly only of God’s existence, not of his necessary existence. Modal versions of the ontological argument speak of the latter. Typically they run roughly as follows. God is, by definition, a necessary being—one that necessarily exists; but, given that such a being is possible, it exists at least in some possible world, w. However, since it is thus true in w that this necessary being exists, it is true in w that this being exists in every possible world, including the actual world, hence this being exists also in actuality. There are many objections that can be and have been raised against both modal and nonmodal versions of the ontological argument. Rather than try to rebut those objections or refine existing versions of the argument, what I shall do in this chapter is to develop a new kind of modal ontological argument for the existence of God—or, more precisely and somewhat less ambitiously, for the existence of a necessary concrete being. I shall explain in due course why, although this kind of argument differs from more familiar variants of the modal ontological argument, it does still unquestionably qualify as a modal ontological argument. Above all, it is an a priori argument that focuses on necessary existence, not just existence.

1. THE NEW ARGUMENT

First, I need to present some definitions. For the argument to proceed, I need to define both what is meant by a necessary being and what is meant by a concrete being. My definition of the former is as follows:

(D1) $x$ is a necessary being $\equiv_{df} x$ exists in every possible world.

In contrast to a necessary being, we have contingent beings, defined thus:

(D2) $x$ is a contingent being $\equiv_{df} x$ exists in some but not every possible world.
Next, I define a concrete being as follows:  

\[
(D3) \quad x \text{ is a concrete being } \equiv \quad \exists t \ x \text{ exists in space and time, or at least in time.}
\]

In contrast to a concrete being, we have abstract beings, defined thus:

\[
(D4) \quad x \text{ is an abstract being } \equiv \quad \exists t \ x \text{ does not exist in space or time.}
\]

Observe that, according to these definitions, a being cannot be both concrete and abstract: being concrete and being abstract are mutually exclusive properties of beings. Also, all beings are either concrete or abstract, at least on the plausible assumption that a being cannot exist in space without also existing in time: the abstract/concrete distinction is exhaustive. Consequently, a being is concrete if and only if it is not abstract. (And, in fact, it is only this consequence of (D3) and (D4) that is crucial for the argument that follows, so that any other pair of definitions with the same consequence would serve its purposes just as well.) However, there is no logical restriction on combinations of the properties involved in the concrete/abstract and the necessary/contingent distinctions. In principle, then, we can have contingent concrete beings, contingent abstract beings, necessary concrete beings, and necessary abstract beings. An example of a contingent concrete being would be a particular horse or a particular mountain. An example of a necessary abstract being would be a particular number or a particular geometrical form. An example of a contingent abstract being would be a set all of whose members are contingent beings, such as the set of all existing horses. An example of a necessary concrete being would be God, if indeed such a being exists. I concede that it is somewhat controversial to say that God, if he exists, exists in time, although many theologians have maintained that he does. One reason, however, why I take God, if he exists, to be a concrete being in this sense is that it is difficult to see how an abstract being could have any causal powers, including the power of creating contingent concrete beings, which God is supposed to have. To say that God exists in time is not to imply that he must change over time: he may still be eternal and immutable. Although I am not in a position to prove that there can be only one necessary concrete being, I think it is very plausible to suppose this. Of course, the traditional God of the philosophers is more than just a unique necessary being with creative powers, but is also omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good. Again, I am not in a position to prove that the necessary concrete being whose existence I hope to establish must have these further properties. However, since most objectors to any version of the ontological argument think that it fails at a much earlier hurdle than this, I shall still consider myself to have achieved something of no little significance if I can at least demonstrate the existence of a necessary concrete being.
The first two premises of my argument are these:

(P1) God is, by definition, a necessary concrete being.

(P2) Some necessary abstract beings exist.

As noted earlier, examples of necessary abstract beings include numbers—for instance, the natural numbers, 0, 1, 2, 3, and so on ad infinitum. Why should we suppose that these numbers exist? Simply because there are mathematical truths concerning them—such as the truth that $2 + 3 = 5$—and these truths are necessary truths, that is, true in every possible world. The natural numbers are the truthmakers of such truths—the entities in virtue of whose existence those truths obtain—and hence those numbers must exist in every possible world.\(^5\)

The third premise of my argument is this:

(P3) All abstract beings are dependent beings.

By a dependent being, in this context, I mean a being that depends for its existence on some other being or beings. This kind of dependence can be called existential dependence and may be defined (at least to a first approximation) as follows:\(^6\)

\[(D5) \ x \text{ depends for its existence on } y = df \text{ necessarily, } x \text{ exists only if } y \text{ exists.}\]

(D5), however, only defines the existential dependence of one particular entity on another. We need also to speak of the existential dependence of one kind of entity on another, which we may define (again to a first approximation) as follows, where $F$s and $G$s are entities of different kinds (for instance, abstract beings and concrete beings):

\[(D6) \ Fs \text{ depend for their existence on } Gs = df \text{ necessarily, } Fs \text{ exist only if } Gs \text{ exist.}\]

Now, if (P3) is true, it seems reasonable to draw the following conclusion:

(C1) All abstract beings depend for their existence on concrete beings.

Of course, it might be suggested that, contrary to (C1), at least some and possibly all abstract beings depend only on other abstract beings for their existence. But this would seem to be problematic, because it would imply that, where abstract beings are concerned, there can be either circles of existential dependence or infinite descending chains of existential dependence, with the consequence that the existence of some or all abstract entities is not properly grounded. Let us then rule this out explicitly by invoking another premise, namely: \(^7\)

(P4) All dependent beings depend for their existence on independent beings.
This still allows that a dependent being may depend for its existence on another dependent being, provided that, via some finite chain of dependence, it ultimately depends for its existence on one or more independent beings. We need to bear in mind here that the relation of existential dependence is a transitive relation: if \( x \) depends for its existence on \( y \) and \( y \) depends for its existence on \( z \), then \( x \) depends for its existence on \( z \).

Alternatively, however, (P3) might be challenged, with the contention that at least some abstract beings are independent beings. Let me briefly consider this possibility here, though I shall return to the matter at the end of this chapter, since it is connected with other issues of theological significance. According to one position in the philosophy of mathematics, numbers are to be understood as being set-theoretical entities. For instance, it may be proposed that the number 0 is identical with the so-called empty set, \( \emptyset \), that the number 1 is identical with the unit set of the empty set, \( \{\emptyset\} \), that the number 2 is identical with the unit set of the unit set of the empty set, \( \{\{\emptyset\}\} \), and so on ad infinitum. Now, in this view, it seems clear that each number except for the number 0 depends for its existence on all of the preceding numbers in the series of natural numbers, simply because any set depends for its existence on its members. But it may be contended that the number 0, here taken to be the empty set, does not depend for its existence on anything else at all. However, I think we ought to be skeptical about the very existence of the so-called empty set: I believe that it is a mere mathematical fiction. After all, how could there really be any such thing as a set with no members, when what a set is, according to our common understanding, is something that “collects together” certain other things, these things being its members. How could something “collect together” nothing?

Anyway, although there is plenty of room for further discussion about these matters, I am going to take it that (P3) and (P4) are both true and hence that (C1), which follows from them, is also true. Sufficiently many good metaphysicians would agree with me for these to qualify as relatively safe assumptions, for the purposes of the present argument. Note that from (P3), together with definitions (D3) and (D4), we can also infer:

\[(C2)\] The only independent beings are concrete beings.

Now, from (C1) we can infer the following:

\[(C3)\] There is no possible world in which only abstract beings exist.

And from (P2) we can infer this:

\[(C4)\] There is no possible world in which no abstract beings exist.

But (C3) and (C4) together imply the following:

\[(C5)\] In every possible world there exist concrete beings.
What (C5) means is that there is no “empty world”—a world devoid of anything existing in space and time, or at least in time.\(^\text{10}\) However, there are two different reasons for which (C5) could be true. One possibility is that (C5) is true because there is a necessary concrete being—a concrete being that exists in every possible world. This, of course, is what I should like to prove to be the case. And, indeed, it is because (C5) is true that we have at least a prima facie reason to believe that the following is true (or, at least, not to reject it out of hand as false):

\[(C6)\] A necessary concrete being is possible.

But another possibility is that (C5) is true just because in every possible world there exist contingent concrete beings—different ones in different worlds. This may very well be the case, but it is obviously not sufficient to prove what I want to prove.

Fortunately, though, I think it can be compellingly argued that only if there is a necessary concrete being can the truth of (P2) be adequately explained. This is because I consider the following further premise to be very plausibly true:

\[(P5)\] No contingent being can explain the existence of a necessary being.

The reason why (P5) is so plausible is this. A necessary being is, by definition (D1), a being that exists in every possible world, whereas a contingent being is, by definition (D2), a being that exists in some but not every possible world. Suppose, then, that \(N\) is a certain necessary being (e.g., the number 7) and that \(C\) is a certain contingent being (e.g., Mount Everest). How could \(C\) explain \(N\)’s existence? After all, \(N\) exists in possible worlds in which \(C\) does not exist—so \(C\) evidently cannot explain \(N\)’s existence in those possible worlds. But how, then, can \(C\) explain \(N\)’s existence even in worlds in which \(C\) does exist? For what \(C\) would have to explain is why \(N\), a necessary being, exists in those worlds, that is, a being that exists in every possible world. It would, apparently, thereby have to explain why \(N\) exists also in worlds in which \(C\) does not exist, which we have already ruled out as impossible. Someone might try to reply that different contingent beings could explain the existence of the same necessary being in different possible worlds: that Mount Everest, say, explains the existence of the number 7 in this, the actual world, while the Golden Mountain, say, explains the existence of the number 7 in some other possible world. But that seems absurd. Surely a contingent being, such as Mount Everest—even an abstract contingent being, such as the set whose members are the Seven Hills of Rome—simply doesn’t have the power to explain the existence of a necessary being, such as the number 7. Again, the problem is that what it would purportedly be explaining the existence of is something that exists in every possible world and hence something whose existence far transcends its own. Furthermore, to contend that the existence of a necessary being, \(N\), is explained in different possible worlds by different contingent beings in those worlds threatens to undermine the very necessity of
N’s existence. For then it appears to be a mere cosmic accident that every possible world happens to contain something that is, allegedly, able to explain the existence of N in that world.

Here it might be objected that, even if (P5) is true, we are not entitled to assume that, where necessary beings are concerned, their existence needs to be explained at all. However, while I agree that there may be no need to explain the existence of a necessary being that is an independent being, I think that the existence of dependent beings does always call for explanation:

(P6) The existence of any dependent being needs to be explained.

And recall that we have already agreed, by endorsing (P2), that some necessary abstract beings—such as the numbers—exist and that, by (P3), these are all dependent beings. So, with the additional help of (P6), we may now infer:

(C7) The existence of necessary abstract beings needs to be explained.

Observe, next, that the fact that an entity $x$ depends for its existence on an entity $y$ does not imply that $y$ explains the existence of $x$. Similarly, the fact that $F$s depend for their existence on $G$s does not imply that $G$s explain the existence of $F$s. Existence-explanation is not simply the inverse of existential dependence. If $x$ depends for its existence on $y$, this only means that $x$ cannot exist without $y$ existing. This is not at all the same as saying that $x$ exists because $y$ exists, or that $x$ exists in virtue of the fact that $y$ exists. So the mere fact that, by (C5), necessary abstract beings cannot exist without concrete beings existing doesn’t imply that concrete beings of just any kind, necessary or contingent, can explain the existence of necessary abstract beings. Indeed, we have already seen good reason to uphold (P5), that no contingent being can explain the existence of a necessary being. At the same time, it is clear that only concrete beings of some kind can explain the existence of necessary abstract beings since the latter, being one and all dependent beings, cannot explain their own existence:

(P7) Dependent beings of any kind cannot explain their own existence.

Furthermore, it seems clear:

(P8) The existence of dependent beings can only be explained by beings on which they depend for their existence.

From (P7), (P8), and (P3), together with (C1), we may now conclude:

(C8) The existence of necessary abstract beings can only be explained by concrete beings.

And from (C7), (C8), and (P5) we may conclude:

(C9) The existence of necessary abstract beings is explained by one or more necessary concrete beings.
From (C9) we may finally infer our desired conclusion:

(C10) A necessary concrete being exists.

2. THE STATUS OF THE ARGUMENT

To draw the whole argument together, I shall now set it out in a concise and consolidated form in which we can ignore some of the subsidiary conclusions that we drew along the way. The key premises are as follows:

(P2) Some necessary abstract beings exist.
(P3) All abstract beings are dependent beings.
(P4) All dependent beings depend for their existence on independent beings.
(P5) No contingent being can explain the existence of a necessary being.
(P6) The existence of any dependent being needs to be explained.
(P7) Dependent beings of any kind cannot explain their own existence.
(P8) The existence of dependent beings can only be explained by beings on which they depend for their existence.

From (P3) and (P4), together with definitions (D3) and (D4), we may conclude:

(C1) All abstract beings depend for their existence on concrete beings.

From (P2), (P3), and (P6) we may conclude:

(C7) The existence of necessary abstract beings needs to be explained.

From (C1), (P3), (P7), and (P8) we can conclude:

(C8) The existence of necessary abstract beings can only be explained by concrete beings.

From (C7), (C8), and (P5) we may conclude:

(C9) The existence of necessary abstract beings is explained by one or more necessary concrete beings.

And from (C9) we may conclude:

(C10) A necessary concrete being exists.

Setting aside, for the moment, any further doubts that this argument might provoke, I need at this point to address the question of whether it really qualifies as a version of a modal ontological argument. It is observed that the argument does not appeal to claim (C6)—that a necessary concrete being is possible—although, of course, if our final conclusion (C10) is true then so too, a fortiori, is (C6), since whatever is actually the case is thereby also possibly the case.
Standard versions of the modal ontological argument do appeal to something like (C6), from which it is then concluded that something like (C10) is true, on the grounds that whatever is possibly necessarily the case is thereby actually necessarily the case. However, arguing for the truth of (C6) without appealing to (C10) is notoriously difficult, and moreover, the principle of modal logic whereby “whatever is possibly necessarily the case is thereby actually necessarily the case” is also controversial. The fact that our new argument does not appeal either to (C6) or to this principle is therefore to its advantage, but it may also lead some to object that it consequently doesn’t really qualify as a type of modal ontological argument.

In response to such an objection, I would reply that the new argument is, in line with modal ontological arguments quite generally, (1) a wholly a priori argument and (2) an argument that focuses on the notion of necessary existence rather than just on that of actual existence. By (1) I mean that all of the argument’s premises are advanced as being a priori truths and that its conclusion follows from these by valid deductive reasoning—in short, that it is an a priori proof of the existence of a necessary concrete being. As for (2), this should be clear from the fact that the argument purports to establish the existence of a necessary being, that is, a being that necessarily exists, not just one that actually exists. Of course, in establishing this, it also assumes the existence of other necessary beings, by adopting premise (P2). But these are not necessary beings of the same kind as that whose existence the argument attempts to prove, being only abstract rather than concrete beings. Hence the argument cannot fairly be accused of being circular or of begging the question. That necessary abstract beings exist, such as numbers, is certainly not entirely uncontroversial, but it is far less controversial than that a necessary concrete being exists. Indeed, I would urge that all of the premises of the new argument are individually considerably less controversial than its conclusion. They are also clearly mutually consistent. And this, really, is the most that one can generally hope to achieve in a philosophical argument: that its premises nontrivially entail its conclusion and that every one of those premises has considerable plausibility and is considerably less controversial than its conclusion.

For an argument with these features has the merit of providing us with a persuasive reason to endorse an interesting conclusion that, considered merely on its own, might appear to be implausible. In general, the more mutually independent premises such an argument has, the more persuasive it is, because this enables each premise to be individually more plausible despite the initial implausibility of the conclusion. So it is actually an advantage of our new argument that it has no fewer than seven premises. Of course, as we have seen, not all of these premises are simply asserted without any attempt at justification. Indeed, for almost all of them, and certainly for all of the more controversial ones, some justification has been offered.
Despite this response, some philosophers might suspect that what I have really offered is some version of the cosmological argument for the existence of God or of a God-like being. In response to such an objection I would reply that I have nowhere appealed to the existence of the cosmos as something that needs to be explained by something “external” to it, where by “the cosmos” I mean the sum total of existing concrete beings. The only beings whose existence I have assumed, and whose existence I seek to explain, are necessary abstract beings. Moreover, I have nowhere appealed to causal considerations in my argument. When I talk about existence-explanation, I do not mean causal explanation, but only metaphysical explanation. This should be evident from the fact that I talk about explaining the existence of abstract beings, which, as I have made clear, I do not regard as being capable of standing in causal relations to anything, since they do not exist in space or time. Consequently, even if my argument looks rather different from standard versions of the modal ontological argument, I believe that if it is to be classified as belonging to any traditional form of argument for a “supreme being” at all, it can only be said to be a version of the modal ontological argument.

3. FURTHER THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE ARGUMENT

Now I want to return, as promised earlier, to the question of whether all abstract beings are indeed dependent beings, since it is crucial to my argument that at least all necessary abstract beings have this status. A clue here, however, is provided by the very expression “abstract.” An abstract being, it would seem, is one which, by its very nature, is in some sense abstracted from—literally, “drawn out of, or away from”—something else. To that extent, then, any such being may reasonably be supposed to depend for its existence on that from which it is “abstracted.” All of the most plausible examples of abstract beings are, interestingly enough, entities that are, in a broad sense, objects of reason—such entities as numbers, sets, and propositions. They are all objects that stand in rational relations to one another, such as mathematical and logical relations. Very arguably, however, it does not make sense to think of such entities as existing and standing in such relations independent of some actual or possible mind that could contemplate and understand them. But then we have a very good candidate for the sort of being “from” which such entities may be supposed to be somehow “abstracted”: namely, a mind of some kind, upon which they would thereby depend for their existence. But if the main argument of this chapter is correct, then in the case of necessary abstract beings like these, the being upon which they depend for their existence and which explains their existence must be a necessary concrete being. Putting these two thoughts together—(1) that necessary abstract beings, insofar as they are objects of
reason, are “mind-dependent” beings, and (2) that they are dependent for their existence on a necessary concrete being—we are led to the conclusion that the being in question must be a rational being with a mind and, indeed, with a mind so powerful that it can comprehend all of mathematics and logic. Thus, despite my earlier warning that the argument of this chapter does not directly establish the existence of a being with all of the traditional “divine attributes,” it does in fact go considerably further in this direction than might initially be supposed. It does, in short, speak strongly in favor of the existence of a necessary concrete being possessed of a rational and infinite mind—something very much like the traditional “God of the philosophers.” Seen in this light, my “new” modal ontological argument even has a close affinity with St. Anselm’s original argument. For, clearly, if it were to be suggested that the “necessary concrete rational being” whose existence I claim to have established is itself merely an object of reason, not something existing in concrete reality, then it may be replied that this would reduce that being to something that is just another necessary abstract being, and thus to something once more requiring the existence of an infinitely “greater” being, in the shape of the necessary concrete rational being whose existence my argument is designed to prove.

**NOTES**

4. For further discussion and defense of this and the following definition, see E. J. Lowe, “The Metaphysics of Abstract Objects,” *Journal of Philosophy* 92 (1995): 509–524. I want to allow that immaterial souls, if they exist and lack all spatial properties, may nonetheless be accounted as concrete beings, by virtue of existing at least in time if not also in space. Note, however, that—as I shall soon explain—my argument does not require me to adopt precisely these definitions.
5. For more on truth and truthmakers, see E. J. Lowe and A. Rami, eds., *Truth and Truth-Making* (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2009), in which an essay of my own on the subject is included.
6. For further discussion and some refinements, see E. J. Lowe, “Ontological Dependence,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2010 ed.), ed. E. N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/dependence-ontological/. Note, however, that the two definitions (D5) and (D6) presented below are not in fact formally called upon in the version of the ontological argument that I am now developing, so that in the remainder of this chapter the notion of existential dependence may, for all intents and purposes, be taken as primitive. There is an advantage in this, inasmuch as finding a perfectly apt definition of existential dependence is no easy task, as I explain in “Ontological Dependence.” In particular, for the purposes of the present chapter, existential dependence really needs to be understood as an asymmetrical relation, and neither (D5) nor (D6) secures this.


9. I do concede, however, that both assumptions have been challenged by good philosophers too. For a challenge to (P4), see J. Schaffer, “Is There a Fundamental Level?” *Noûs* 37 (2003): 498–517.


**FOR FURTHER READING**


