

## Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

### A pretty big IF

#### *The very idea of God itself cannot prove God's existence*

Philosophers have often looked to the world for evidence of God's existence but sometimes they have looked within, to the very concept or idea of God within their minds. Anselm argues this way, as does Descartes; the latter, taking the idea of God to be that of the supremely perfect being, argues that by definition such a being would have all perfections and would therefore have to exist, since existence is a perfection. God thus exists *by definition*. An imposing argument, to be sure – but Kant thinks it a faulty one, on every level.

At its heart is the idea that denying God's existence would lead to a contradiction: if by definition this being has all perfections then denying His existence is like saying "the being with all perfections lacks a perfection." That's just as contradictory as denying a triangle has three angles, which would amount to saying "a three-angled figure does not have three angles." And since contradictions are always impossible it's as impossible for God *not* to exist as for a triangle not to have three angles. Which means that God *must* exist, exactly as a triangle must have three angles.

But not so fast!

In the triangle case, you only get a contradiction if you assume some triangle exists which lacks any of the defining

properties of triangles, such as having three angles. You do not get a contradiction if you deny any triangles exist at all. To say "three-angledness is one of the defining properties of a triangle," then, is not to say any triangles actually exist; it's only to say that *if* some triangle exists *then* it must have three angles. But then the same will be true in the case of God. To say "existence is one of God's defining properties" is not (despite appearances) to say God actually exists; it's only to say that *if* God exists *then* He must exist. And that is a pretty big IF. So just as it's no contradiction to deny triangles exist along with all their defining properties, it's no contradiction to deny that God exists with His, including existence.

We may therefore reject Descartes's claim that it's impossible for God not to exist.

But there's an even deeper problem with Descartes's argument. It's that "existence" isn't a "perfection" (or a "property") at all, something that could define a thing in the way that "three-angledness" defines triangles. We do define a triangle as a three-angled figure; but when we say a triangle exists we're not further defining it, we're merely saying that something actually fits that definition. Indeed we may doubt whether something of a certain definition actually exists, such as a unicorn. But then suppose a unicorn were discovered. If "exists" were a real property then the thing found would not be the thing we were doubting, for the thing found has a property ("exists") that the thing doubted does not. That is clearly absurd, but it's what follows if you treat "exists" as if it were a property that could define a thing.

So Descartes might be right that God is defined as the "being with all perfections." If such a thing exists then it must have all its defining properties, namely those perfections. But "existence" is not a property and so not a perfection.