Kant offers three different arguments against the ontological argument, that one can always deny the subject along with the predicate of a judgment to avoid contradiction, that no existence claims are analytic, and that existence is not a predicate. I argue that the first and third criticisms are the strongest, and enough to reject the ontological argument. I will first briefly reconstruct the ontological argument, so that it is clear what Kant means to refute. I will then explain and evaluate each of Kant’s arguments in turn.

A simple reconstruction of a conceptual ontological argument runs something like this

(1) I have the concept of a greatest possible being  (Premise)
(2) To exist is greater than to lack existence  (Premise)
(3) So, my concept of a greatest possible being must include existence  (From 1 and 2)
(4) Hence, there exists a greatest possible being  (From 3)

The move from (1) and (2) to (3) is licensed by the consideration that if my concept did not include existence, then I would not have the concept of a greatest possible being because I could conceive of a greater being, namely one that had the property of existing in addition to any other properties. The move from (3) to (4) is justified by the consideration that the claim that God does not exist is contradictory because existence is included in the concept of God in the same way the claim that triangles have more than three sides is contradictory because three-sidedness is included in the concept of a triangle.

This reconstruction makes central use of the notions of concepts and existence as a predicate that can fall within a concept. Kant’s three arguments against the ontological
argument fit in various places. The argument that no existence claims are analytic attempts to find a problem with the whole proof. The argument that existence is not a property, if true, undermines the second premise. And the argument that a subject can always be denied along with the predicate would undermine the inference from (3) to (4). I will now turn to the Kant’s arguments themselves.

Kant first argues that a subject can always be canceled along with its predicate without committing a contradiction. Kant writes

If I cancel the predicate in an identical judgment and keep the subject, then a contradiction arises; hence I say that the former necessarily pertains to the latter. But if I cancel the subject together with the predicate, then no contradiction arises; for there is no longer anything that could be contradicted. (A594/B622)

Kant gives an example of a triangle. One cannot say one has a triangle that does not have three sides because that violates the concept of a triangle. However, one can say that there are no three sides because there is no triangle (A594/B622). That is, one cannot say that there is an object that falls under some concept C and also say that some aspect of C does not hold. However, one can say that there is no object that falls under C and thus that some aspect of C does not hold of any object. For example, there are two readings of the sentence ‘It is not the case that Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street.’ Under one reading, it is the false claim that Sherlock Holmes lives on some other street. On another, it denies that Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street by saying that Sherlock Holmes does not live anywhere, because he does not exist.

This analysis correctly points out what goes wrong in the move from (3) to (4) in the ontological argument. Recall that in the proof it was held that claiming that God does not exist is contradictory because existence belongs to the concept of God. But notice that ‘God does not exist’ can be taken in two ways. First as a claim that God exists but does not have the property of existing. Second as a claim that God does not exist and so the concept of God does not have any object that falls under it. It is clear that only the first reading implies a contradiction and allows the ontological argument to go through. However, the
first reading also begs the question against the skeptic who would obviously have the second reading, under which the argument does not go through, in mind.

Kant’s second argument against the ontological argument is that no existence claims are analytic and, hence, that the existence of God cannot be proven from the concept alone. Any existence claim must be either analytic or synthetic. If analytic, then

> with existence you add nothing to your thought of the thing; but then either the thought that is in you must be the thing itself, or else you have presupposed the existence as belonging to the possibility, and then inferred that existence on this pretext from its inner possibility, which is nothing but a miserable tautology. (A597/B625)

Kant has in mind the following dilemma for any would-be analytic existence claim. When I move from my conception of an existent God to asserting that God exists, I might be doing one of two things. On the one hand, I might merely be asserting the existence of my concept, so that God exists means only that my concept of God exists, which is an entirely uninteresting conclusion. On the other hand, I might have brought in the assumption that God exists when I said I had the conception of an existent God. For example, if I write a story about an existent detective, I could be taken as saying one of two things. I might mean that the detective exists according to my story—I did not write a story about a non-existent detective the way I might write about a non-seeing or non-hearing one—or I might mean that there is an actually existing detective and that my story is about that fellow. In the first case I cannot say that the detective exists outside my story, and in the second it was already assumed that the detective exists. In either case my story alone cannot prove that there is an existent detective. Likewise, a concept alone cannot prove that there is a God.

If, however, existence claims are synthetic, then the ontological argument fails. Kant writes

> If you concede, on the contrary, as in all fairness you must, that every existential proposition is synthetic, then how would you assert that the predicate of existence may not be canceled without contradiction?—since this privilege pertains only in the analytic propositions, as resting on its very character. (A598/B626)

This part of the argument is straightforward. If existence claims are always synthetic then
we need to reach beyond any single concept in order to prove them. We not only need to possess a concept, but we must also go out in the world to find out if there is an object that does, in fact, fall under our concept.

There are two problems with this argument. First, there seem to be straightforward analytic existence claims, e.g. there is a smallest prime number. While Kant would argue that mathematics is synthetic, that response is not available to anyone who shares the more common view that mathematics is analytic. Likewise, one might deny that any numbers exist and say that while it is true that according to number theory there is a smallest prime number, there is in fact no smallest prime number. I do not plan to defend the analyticity of mathematics or the existence of numbers, but insofar as one has reason to believe these beliefs are reasonable one should also hold it reasonable to think there are analytic existence claims. A final worry one might have with such examples is that the smallest prime number is an abstract object, and perhaps it is only abstract objects which can be proven to exist analytically. But certainly God is just as unlike ordinary objects in space-time as abstract objects are, so it would be wrong to simply exclude God, without argument, from the class of objects which can be proved to exist analytically.

Second, if it is true that there are no analytic existence claims and that the ontological argument aims at making one, then it must be unsound. If unsound, the argument must be either formally invalid or have false premises. When attacking an argument, it is better to attack the validity of the argument or the truth of its premises, then to cite general considerations that point against arguments of the sort. Insofar as we have reason to believe the ontological argument is valid and that its premises are true, we have reason to think that there are in fact analytic existence claims. To reject the ontological argument on the grounds that there are no analytic existence claims puts the cart before the horse.

Kant’s last argument against the ontological argument is that existence is not a predicate. Kant writes, “Being is obviously not a real predicate, i.e., a concept of something that could add to the concept of a thing” (A596/B624). Instead, existence “is merely the positing of
a thing or of certain determinations in themselves” (A596/B624). It is not immediately obvious what Kant means.

One possibility, is to understand the claim that existence is not a predicate in terms of First Order Logic. In FOL, ‘∃’ is used to denote existence, and it is not used as a predicate letter that applies to singular terms, but as a second-order operator that turns well formed formula into sentences by binding variables. Let ‘D’ be a predicate that takes one argument that is interpreted ‘is a dog’. The translation of ‘a dog exists’ into FOL is ‘∃x(Dx)’. Now, ‘∃x(Dx)’ is not a sentence about any particular dog, but is about the concept dog and says of the concept that it is instantiated. Now one can say that, say, Kant exists in FOL by saying ‘∃x(x = Kant)’. This could be interpreted as meaning that the property of being identical with Kant is instantiated or that there is some object which is identical with Kant. In either case, the notion of some object having the property of existence drops out.

One problem with this interpretation is that it does not provide a ready translation for ‘God does not exist’. One cannot say ‘¬∃x(x = God)’, because FOL does not allow for non-referring terms. There are two options. One could banish singular terms in favor of predicatized names. So instead of singular terms like ‘God’ or ‘Kant’ one would allow only the predicates ‘is God’ or ‘is Kant’. But this seems ad hoc and unsatisfying. Not only do we at least seem to use names as referring devices, but it is also unclear how we should understand predicatized names. If we understand them as descriptions of objects, then we face the risk that two people are using different names if they know a person under different descriptions. If we understand the predicates as arbitrary, then it seems that we have just snuck names back in. On the other hand we might allow non-referring terms. This move would give us a Free Logic. If we did this we would have to introduce a new predicate letter, ‘E’, to sort out those singular terms that do refer from those that do not. The most natural interpretation of ‘E’ is ‘exists’. So, to say that God does not exist would translate as ‘¬EGod’. Of course, even this would not force one to admit that existence is a genuine predicate, because we could still regard existence as a predicate that applied to terms and
said that they referred and not as a predicate that applied to objects and said that they exist.

A second way of understanding Kant’s claim that existence is not a predicate can be teased out of his description of the differences between a concept and the object which falls under it. Kant writes

Every concept, in regard to what is not contain in it, is indeterminate, and stands under the principle of determinability: that of every two contradictorily opposed predicates only one can apply to it, which rests on the principle of contradiction and hence is a merely logical principle, which abstracts from every content of cognition, and in view nothing but the logical form of cognition

Every thing, however, as to its possibility, further stands under the principle of thorough-going determination; according to which, among all possible predicates of things, insofar as they are compared with their opposites, one must apply to it. (A572/B600)

Concepts, then, are partially specified as to what properties make them up; a concept contains some predicates, the negations of certain other predicates, and is silent regarding others. Concepts are determinable in that one could imagine adding further specification to them. An object, on the other hand, is fully specified; every predicate or its negation belongs to each object. For example, the concept of a zebra is specified to be horse-shaped, have black and white stripes, and to live in Africa, but has an unspecified temperament or number of children. Any particular zebra will have some determinant temperament, e.g. angry, and some number of children, e.g. 2, along with a determination regarding every other possible predicate.

To say of something that it exists is just to say that there is something that falls under the concept in question. For example, to say ‘this zebra exists’ is just to say that there is an object which falls under the concept of a zebra. That Kant has something like this in mind is warranted by his claim that

Now if I think of a being as the highest reality (without defect), the question still remains whether it exists or not. For although nothing at all is missing in my concept of the possible real content of a thing in general, something is still missing in the relation to my entire state of thinking, namely that the cognition of this object should also be possible a posteriori. (A600/B628)
If one has a concept of a perfect being, existence cannot be settled by looking merely at the concept because one still needs to determine whether or not there is any object out in the world which falls under the concept. So far, I have described how we should understand Kant’s denial of existence as a predicate, but I have not looked at his arguments.

Kant gives two arguments for thinking existence is not a predicate. First, Kant argues that nothing is added to a concept when we say that something exists (A599/B627). For example, “a hundred actual dollars does not contain the least bit more than a hundred possible ones” (A599/B627). One might object, that it is far from clear that this is true. Take Sherlock Holmes for example. The Sherlock Holmes of Conan Doyle’s short stories is an existent detective chasing down existent criminals. A story in which Sherlock Holmes chases down some existent criminals is a very different story from one in which he attempts to chase down some non-existent ones (who were invented, say, by professor Moriarty), because in the latter Holmes could never catch said criminals. If one were to reply with the obvious rejoinder that Sherlock Holmes does not actually exist, our objector would be happy to concede. Sherlock Holmes has the predicate of existing only according to the story, just like he has the predicate of living on Baker Street only according to the story. Nevertheless, existing like living on Baker Street are predicates.

A more sophisticated rejoinder would attack along these lines. The stories set up the concept of Sherlock Holmes, but do not include existence because existence is not a predicate that can fall under a concept. Nevertheless, it is true that according to the story Sherlock Holmes exists, but that does not ascribe a property to Sherlock Holmes. It only says that according to the story something falls under the concept of Sherlock Holmes. In the actual world, nothing falls under the concept of Sherlock Holmes so we say that Sherlock Holmes does not exist.

Kant’s second argument seems stronger yet. If existence were a predicate, then if we had a concept that did not contain existence and later found an object that matched the concept “what would exist would not be the same as what I had thought in my concept, but more
than that, and I could not say that the very object of my concept exists" (A600/B628). That is, if I had a concept of some animal that did not include existence and later stumbled upon an example of such an animal, I would be forced to say that I did not find the animal I had a concept of, because I did not conceive of the animal as existing while the particular that I found in the wild does exist.

One might object to this argument. Since concepts are partially specified and only determinable, not fully determined, it is not clear why most would be unspecified as to existence. For instance I could have the concept of an animal with very colorful feathers, a large beak, etc. which said nothing about the bird’s existence. If I then found such an animal, I would have found an individual which was fully determined as existent among many other predicates about which my concept was silent. Recall the angry zebra that had 2 children. It was no less a zebra simply because it was more fully specified than the concept.

One might reply that while it might be true that in general concepts like zebra are under-specified with regard to existence, our concepts could be specified with regard to existence. In which case one could still generate Kant’s counterexamples. Returning to our Sherlock Holmes example, if it were the case that existence were a predicate, then the concept of Sherlock Holmes according to the stories would possess it. However, we all know that Sherlock Holmes does not exist in the real world. So, it appears we have two concepts of Sherlock Holmes, one that we read about in crime novels, and another which we claim does not exist. This, however, is absurd. When we say that Sherlock Holmes does not exist we deny existence to the Holmes of the novels, not some second concept.

A more general point against existence being a predicate comes from the fact that throughout my discussion it has been necessary to talk about objects falling under concepts. Obviously whatever this falling under relation is, it cannot be a genuine predicate that a concept has, as that would generate an infinite regress. I think Kant’s point is that existence just is this falling under relation. It is not a genuine predicate but a relation of an object that says that it falls under some concept. If Kant is right then premises (2) and (3)
of the ontological argument are also fatally undermined.

So, I conclude that while it remains possible that some existence claims might be analytic, Kant delivers a fatal blow to the ontological argument for the existence of God by undermining premises (2) and (3) as well as the inference from (3) to (4) on any non-question begging interpretation.

References