

Ontological argument: derived from the Greek terms *ontos* (being), and *logos* (rational account). The ontological argument, first developed by Saint Anselm of Canterbury, takes a variety of forms. The common theme among them is that they begin a priori – proceeding from the mere concept of God – and conclude that God must exist.

In the last two chapters we examined cosmological and teleological arguments, both of which focused on some feature of the universe and concluded either that God must be posited to account for it (cosmological argument) or that it pointed to a designer of the universe (teleological argument). These arguments are a posteriori, for they are based on premises that can be known only by experience of the world. Another kind of argument attempts to demonstrate that God's non-existence is impossible – this is the ontological argument. It is unique among the traditional arguments for God's existence in that it is an a priori argument, for it is based on premises that can allegedly be known independently of experience of the world.

The ontological argument has bedeviled philosophers – atheists and non-theists alike – for centuries. There are different versions of the argument, and I am including here what are perhaps two of its strongest formulations: Anselm's classic argument and Plantinga's contemporary argument.¹

ANSELM'S ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

One of the most creative thinkers of the Middle Ages was Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109). He was both a devoted monk and an apologist of Christian orthodoxy, and all of his writings are centered on Christian theology – either explaining it or defending it. Two of his books, the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, include arguments for the existence of God. In the former work, Anselm's arguments are complex and probably not too effective at convincing others of their conclusions. In the *Proslogion* he seeks

a single argument which would require no other for its proof than itself alone; and alone would suffice to demonstrate that God truly exists, and that there is a supreme good requiring nothing else, which all other things require for their existence and well-being ...”²

Anselm desired an argument which would not fail in convincing others of its truth, and he believed that he had done so with the ontological argument. This argument was first developed by Anselm in Book II of his *Proslogion*, and some have argued

Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) was a leading Christian thinker of the eleventh century. He was the Archbishop of Canterbury and opposed the Crusades while holding this office. He is best known today for his ontological argument, but his work in natural theology and philosophical theology goes well beyond it. He also developed other arguments for God's existence and wrote on such matters as the nature of God, the incarnation, free will, sin and redemption. His works include the *Monologion*, *Proslogion*, and *Cur Deus Homo* (*Why Did God Become Man?*).

that he presents different versions of it in Books II and III. For our purposes we will focus on the argument as presented in Book II, a reflective commentary on a passage in the Old Testament book of Psalms which reads “... the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God.” (Psalm 14:1)

And so, Lord, do thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as thou knowest it to be profitable, to understand that thou art as we believe; and that thou art that which we believe. And, indeed, we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. Or is there no such nature, since the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God? ... But, at any rate, this very fool, when he hears of this being of which I speak – a being than which nothing greater can be conceived – understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding; although he does not understand it to exist.

For, it is one thing for an object to be in the understanding, and another to understand that the object exists. When a painter first conceives of what he will afterwards perform, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand it to be, because he has not yet performed it. But after he has made the painting, he both has it in his understanding, and he understands that it exists, because he has made it.

Hence, even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For, when he hears of this, he understands it. And whatever is understood, exists in the understanding. And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater.

Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.³

The writing here is somewhat elusive and thus lends itself to different interpretations.⁴ Here is one way of explicating the argument:

- 1 Everyone (even the atheist) is able to understand by the term “God” a being than which none greater can be conceived.
- 2 So, a being than which none greater can be conceived exists in the mind (i.e. the understanding) when one hears about such a being.
- 3 We can conceive of a being than which none greater can be conceived which exists both in the mind and in reality.
- 4 To exist in reality is greater than to exist in the mind alone.
- 5 If, therefore, a being than which none greater can be conceived exists in the mind alone and not in reality, it is not a being than which none greater can be conceived.
- 6 Therefore, a being than which none greater can be conceived exists in reality.

Let us unpack the argument. First, premise 1 is fairly straightforward. It is not making any claims about whether God exists or not; it is simply claiming that any rational person should be able to understand what one means when they define God as a being than which none greater can be conceived (i.e. the greatest imaginable being). To deny that God exists is to deny that a being than which none greater can be conceived exists. It seems that even an atheist could at least grant Anselm this definition.

The second premise is making the point that in some sense a being than which none greater can be conceived exists in the mind of the one who understands the concept. In order to affirm or deny the existence of a being than which none greater can be conceived, one must understand what it is that is being affirmed or denied. So a being than which none greater can be conceived exists at least as a mental entity, or concept, if it is affirmed or denied. It's important here to note that there are several ways things can exist (or, several modes of existence):

- a) in the mind but not in reality (examples include centaurs, unicorns, Santa Claus);
- b) in reality but not in the mind (such as an undiscovered star);
- c) both in the mind and in reality (such as Tony Blair);
- d) neither in the mind nor in reality (such as the internet in 500 BCE).

The claim in premise 2 is simply that a being than which none greater can be conceived exists in the mind (and so exists either as a or c).

In premise 3 the claim is that we can understand the notion of a being than which none greater can be conceived as existing both mentally and in reality (as in c). Tony Blair currently exists both in reality and as a concept or idea in the mind. So, too, we can at least conceive of God as existing in the mind and in reality (but whether God actually exists in reality is a different matter at this point). Premise 4 makes the point

I remember the precise moment, one day in 1894, as I was walking along Trinity Lane, when I saw in a flash (or thought I saw) that the ontological argument is valid. I had gone out to buy a tin of tobacco; on my way back, I suddenly threw it up in the air, and exclaimed as I caught it: “Great Scott, the ontological argument is sound!”

Bertrand Russell⁵

that it is *greater* to exist in reality than in the mind alone. This is clearly a debatable premise, and for many the soundness of the argument hinges on it. We will explore it further below when we examine Kant's objection.

The fifth premise simply follows from the previous one. If it is true that it is greater to exist in reality than in the mind, then a being which exists only in the mind would not be the greatest conceivable being; to affirm otherwise is to contradict yourself, for you would be affirming that the greatest possible being (one which exists in reality) is not the greatest possible being. Therefore, we are led logically to conclude that God (a being than which none greater can be conceived) exists in reality.

Criticisms of Anselm's argument

Criticisms have been raised against Anselm's ontological argument from its very inception, even among devoted religious believers. We will focus here on two of the more influential ones.

The greatest possible island

One of the earliest objections to the ontological argument was offered by one of Anselm's fellow monks, Gaunilo of Marmoutiers (c. 11th century). Gaunilo offered several objections to the argument, but perhaps the most well-known is an objection based on the analogy of the greatest possible island. Consider the idea of a perfect island – an island which exists but was lost to humanity. Following the same structure as Anselm's argument described above, we could construct the following:

- 1 Everyone is able to understand by the term “Perfect Island” an island than which none greater can be conceived.
- 2 So, an island than which none greater can be conceived exists in the mind (i.e. the understanding) when one hears about such an island.
- 3 We can conceive of an island than which none greater can be conceived which exists both in the mind and in reality.

- 4 To exist in reality is greater than to exist in the mind alone.
- 5 If, therefore, an island than which none greater can be conceived exists in the mind alone and not in reality, it is not an island than which none greater can be conceived.
- 6 Therefore, an island than which none greater can be conceived exists in reality.

This strategy of Gaunilo's lost island is called a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. It is an argument form in which you (1) assume a position for the sake of argument, (2) follow the argument structure and derive an absurd or ridiculous outcome, and (3) then conclude that the original argument structure must have been wrong as it led to an absurd conclusion. Gaunilo concludes his rebuttal this way:

If a man should try to prove to me by such reasoning that this island truly exists, and that its existence should no longer be doubted, either I should believe that he was jesting, or I know not which I ought to regard as the greater fool: myself, supposing that I should allow this proof; or him, if he should suppose that he had established with any certainty the existence of this island.⁶

His point, of course, is that the perfect island argument does not really prove that such an island exists – it would be absurd to believe that there is a perfect island – so this argument must be flawed. And, since Anselm's ontological argument follows the same basic structure, it too must be flawed.

Anselm offers his own reply to Gaunilo:

Now I promise confidently that if any man shall devise anything existing either in reality or in concept alone (except that than which a greater cannot be conceived) to which he can adapt the sequence of my reasoning, I will discover that thing, and will give him his lost island, not to be lost again.

But it now appears that this being than which a greater is inconceivable cannot be conceived not to be, because it exists on so assured a ground of truth; for otherwise it would not exist at all.⁷

Anselm's point is that, unlike with a being than which none greater can be conceived, the greatest possible island is not something that one can "discover" in following his line of reasoning. Anselm seems to imply here that he can conceive of such an island's not existing. With God – that than which none greater can be conceived – it is impossible to conceive of such a being as not existing. But not so with the perfect island.

Assessing Anselm's reply is difficult. For one, it's not clear exactly what he means in this concise, perhaps glib, response. Furthermore, if he means that it is possible to conceive of a perfect island's not existing, it's not clear what he means by "conceivable" in this context. In any case, in evaluating the soundness of the

Gaunilo's rebuttal, much hinges on the meaning of the term *conceivable*, and there is lively, ongoing debate about it.⁸

Existence is not a predicate

Perhaps the most serious objection to Anselm's ontological argument (at least the version presented in *Proslogion* II) was raised by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). He claimed that existence is not a real predicate.⁹ The objection is raised against premise 4 (together with premise 3) in the argument above and can be spelled out this way: existence is not a predicate such that it is a property which can be affirmed of a thing. Existence does not add to the concept of a thing; rather, existence is the instantiation of a thing.¹⁰

Consider this example. Suppose you see a cat walk in front of you, and the cat happens to be black. When you make the claim that the cat is black, you are adding a property (blackness) to the concept of a cat. There are other cats which are not black; it is not essential to the concept of a cat that it be black. When you claim that the cat exists, however, you are not adding anything to the concept of a cat; you are only saying that the concept of a cat is exemplified or instantiated. In Anselm's argument he is implying that existence is a predicate which adds to the concept of a being than which none greater can be conceived (it is greater to have the property of existing than to not have it). But, argues Kant, asserting that something exists doesn't add anything to the concept of such a being (or to any concept, for that matter); it is just affirming that the concept is instantiated. So Anselm's argument is flawed.

In reply, the following point could be made. I can conceive of a particular cat in my mind – consider, once again, my friend's cat Jack – and I can think about this cat. I can look forward to taking care of it, to petting it, to feeding it (all of which I have actually done), and so on. But I can also think of another cat, a cat identical to Jack in every respect except this one: this cat exists only in my mind, not in reality; it is an imaginary cat. I can never actually take care of, pet, or feed this cat, for it exists only in my mind. It does indeed seem that there is something *greater* about the first cat – it really exists!

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was a German philosopher who is widely regarded as one of the most significant thinkers in the history of Western philosophy. His work in epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics has influenced much of the work in philosophy after him. His primary books include *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Religion within the Limits of Religion Alone*, and *Critique of Practical Reason*.

A rebuttal is that Jack's existence has not added anything new to the concept of Jack; there is no difference of properties between the concepts of the existing Jack and the non-existing Jack, only the different ways they are related to our experiences. I can actually feed and pet the existing Jack, not the imaginary Jack. But that does not involve a new property. And if existence is not a property, it cannot be a *greater* one. Thus, the fourth premise of Anselm's argument is false, and so the argument fails.¹¹

PLANTINGA'S MODAL ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Recently Alvin Plantinga (1932–) devised a version of the ontological argument which utilizes the semantics of modal logic: possibility, necessity, and possible worlds.¹² A *possible world* is a world that is logically possible (unlike, say, a world that contains contradictions such as that John and Mary are shorter than each other simultaneously, or that there are round squares, or that $2 + 2 = 5$).¹³ Keeping in mind that a *maximally excellent being* is one that is omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect in *every possible world*, his argument can be simplified and stated this way:¹⁴

- 1 It is possible that a being exists which is maximally great (a being that we can call God).
- 2 So there is a possible world in which a maximally great being exists.
- 3 A maximally great being is necessarily maximally excellent in every possible world (by definition).
- 4 Since a maximally great being is necessarily maximally excellent in every possible world, that being is necessarily maximally excellent in the actual world.
- 5 Therefore, a maximally great being (i.e. God) exists in the actual world.

This argument is formally valid (again, this means that if its premises are true, its conclusion must also be true). But is it sound? That is, are its premises true as well?

Plantinga himself does not believe that the argument provides conclusive proof that God exists, for some may deny the first premise. Nonetheless, he maintains, "there is nothing *contrary to reason or irrational*" in accepting it.¹⁵ So, while it does not establish the truth that God exists, he believes it does at least establish its "rational acceptability."

Let us take the premises one at a time. The first premise states that it is possible that God – a maximally great being – exists. Whether it is possible that such a being exists is crucial to the argument, and we will examine that more closely below in the first objection.

Premise 2 brings into the argument the notion of possible worlds. This, too, is a crucial premise, and one for which there is widespread disagreement. On one description of possible worlds semantics (*semantics* has to do with the meanings of

Modal logic (from "modes" of the verb "to be") is a system of logic which utilizes such modal expressions as "*possibly*" and "*necessarily*." Propositions are either true or false. Sometimes, however, a proposition is not just true but necessarily true. Other propositions are false but possibly true, and still others are false and necessarily false. Utilizing these notions of necessity and possibility, the basic principles of modal logic include such claims as "if something is impossible then it is necessarily false" and "that which is necessary is both truly actual and possible." Modal logic has become a frequently utilized tool in the formal analysis of philosophical arguments, especially in metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of religion.

terms and symbols), such worlds are not realities which actually or literally exist independent of our thinking about them; they are constructs which help us think through and understand a number of difficult concepts, such as counterfactuals, propositions, and properties. We could think of possible worlds as a very large conjunction: $a \ \& \ b \ \& \ c \ \& \ d \ \dots$ (the individual conjuncts each represent a proposition or claim).¹⁶ A possible world then is not another universe, as real as the universe of which we are a part. Rather, it is a complete description of reality – a complete set of propositions – and there are countless descriptions of reality. For example, there is a possible world $a \ \& \ b \ \& \ c \ \& \ d \ \dots$ as noted above. But there is also a possible world $\neg a \ \& \ b \ \& \ c \ \& \ d \ \dots$ (" $\neg a$ " means "not a "), and another $a \ \& \ \neg b \ \& \ c \ \& \ d \ \dots$, and yet another $\neg a \ \& \ \neg b \ \& \ c \ \& \ \neg d \ \dots$, and so on. One and only one of the descriptions of possible worlds will include only true conjuncts and thus will depict the world as it truly is; that is the actual world.

There is no possible world which contains contradictions or which is metaphysically inconceivable. For example, there is no possible world where everything in that world is both circular and rectangular at the same time, for to be so would be a contradiction. Nor is there a possible world in which George Bush is a color, for individual human beings cannot conceivably be identical to colors (of course, George Bush has a particular color, and the name "George Bush" could be assigned to any particular color, but these facts miss the point). To claim, then, that there is a possible world in which a maximally great being exists is not to claim that there is some "flesh and blood" universe where God is, but that the proposition *a maximally great being exists* consists in some maximal description of reality.

With the third premise there is simply the point that the definition of a maximally great being is necessarily omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect in every possible world. To describe a maximally great being as being less than omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect is to misconstrue the meaning of such a being as defined in this case.

Michael Martin (1932–) is an analytic philosopher, atheist, and Professor Emeritus at Boston University. His work has focused primarily on philosophy of religion, and he has published numerous articles and books defending atheism and replying to arguments for the existence of God. He has written *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, *God, Morality and Meaning*, and *The Big Domino in The Sky and Other Atheistic Tales*.

we must also conclude that special ghosts, gremlins, unicorns and countless other mythical creatures exist as well.

In reply, one could argue that premise 1 is clearly contrary to reason whereas premise 1' is not, for it is not possible that a special fairy exists since fairies are presumably physical objects (or essentially connected to physical objects). But no physical object can be a necessary being since it is possible that there are no physical objects whatsoever. Since Plantinga's maximally excellent being is not necessarily a physical object, Martin's objection does not apply to Plantinga's argument.²³ It is interesting to note that this rebuttal is similar, in important respects, to Anselm's rebuttal of Gaunilo. History does indeed repeat itself.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we have examined two versions of the ontological argument. First, we looked at Anselm's argument in which one begins with the premise that everyone, even the atheist, is able to understand by the term "God" a being than which none greater can be conceived. And everyone, even the atheist, can conceive of such a being as existing both mentally and in reality. Furthermore, to exist in reality is *greater* than mere mental existence. Since it would be a contradiction to affirm that the greatest possible being does not exist in reality but only in the mind (because existing in reality is greater than existing in the mind), he concludes that God must exist.

This is an intriguing argument. Many of the leading philosophers throughout the centuries have interacted with it, and some have attempted to refute it. We looked at two prominent objections. The first one was based on the analogy of the greatest possible island and was developed by Anselm's fellow monk, Gaunilo. Utilizing a *reductio ad absurdum* argument style, he argued that if we affirm Anselm's ontological argument, we must also affirm that the greatest possible island exists. Since that conclusion is absurd, so too is Anselm's conclusion. A second objection to Anselm's argument was offered by Immanuel Kant; namely, that existence is not a real predicate. Since existence does not add to the concept

of a thing, and in Anselm's argument existence is treated as a real predicate, his argument is flawed.

The second form of the ontological argument we examined was Plantinga's modal argument. He provides a valid form of the ontological argument using the modal notions of possibility and possible worlds. Simply put, if it is possible that there exists a maximally great being (one that is maximally excellent in all possible worlds), then there actually exists a maximally excellent being (one that is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect). However, the soundness of the argument has been challenged on multiple fronts.

One objection is that God's existence is logically or metaphysically impossible. There are various ways of arguing for God's impossibility, including that the properties attributed to a maximally great being are either internally contradictory or contradict other propositions which we know to be true. Second, since there is no universal agreement about the role modal logic should play in metaphysical discussions such as this one, concluding that the argument is sound is too hasty. Finally, the argument can be parodied such that if you affirm it you must also affirm the existence of mythical creatures such as fairies, ghosts, and gremlins.

Of the various arguments for the existence of God which have been proposed historically, ontological arguments have perhaps been the least effective at convincing unbelievers that theism is true. Nevertheless, more than a few of the leading minds in history have been convinced by at least one version of it – either its soundness or its rational acceptability. Moreover, since the ontological argument is deductive rather than inductive, if it is sound, it accomplishes more with a few simple premises than the other arguments accomplish with an accumulation of evidences and scientific considerations. Thus, though controversial, it has quite a powerful punch for those who are convinced of its soundness.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW/DISCUSSION

1. Describe one version of the ontological argument (either Anselm's version or Plantinga's modal version) in your own words. Is it sound? Defend your answer.
2. If the ontological argument proves that God exists (and, of course, this is hotly contested), does it prove that a particular deity exists (e.g. the Christian, Islamic, Jewish, or Hindu God)? Explain.
3. Is it greater to exist than to not exist, as Anselm claimed? Explain your answer. How does your answer affect the ontological argument?
4. Can you conceive of God's non-existence? If so, what follows from this regarding the ontological argument?
5. Explain Gaunilo's lost island rebuttal. Is it sound? Does it refute Anselm's ontological argument? Why or why not?
6. In your own words, explain Kant's objection that existence is not a predicate. Do you agree? Does it refute Anselm's argument? Defend your answers.
7. Does Plantinga's argument succeed in avoiding Kant's criticism? If so, how so? If not, why not?
8. Do research on reasons why some philosophers believe that God's existence is a logical or metaphysical impossibility (the footnotes and Further reading section offer helpful resources for this project). Explicate some of these reasons. Do you agree with them? Why or why not?
9. If it can be demonstrated that God exists because the concept of a necessary being entails God's existence, then does the concept of a perfect fairy prove that it exists, to? Explain the difference, if there is one.
10. How does the ontological argument differ from other classic arguments for the existence of God?

FURTHER READING

- Anselm ([1077–8] 1962) *Proslogion*, in *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*. LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing. (Contains the original statement of the ontological argument.)
- Davis, Stephen (2003) "The Ontological Argument," in Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser, eds. *The Rationality of Theism*. London: Routledge. (A supportive overview and analysis of two versions of the ontological argument.)
- Everitt, Nicholas (2004) *The Non-existence of God*. London: Routledge. (Chapter 3 contains an overview and critique of ontological arguments.)
- Gaunilo ([1078] 1962) *On Behalf of the Fool*, in *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*. LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing. (Contains criticisms of Anselm's ontological argument.)
- Hartshorne, Charles (1965) *Anselm's Discovery: A Re-examination of the Ontological Proof for God's Existence*. (Includes an analysis of Anselm's argument as well as a history of replies.)
- Kant, Immanuel (1963) *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Norman Kemp Smith. New York: St. Martin's Press. (Kant's critique of the ontological argument is found in Book II, Chapter 3.)

- Leftow, Brian (2005) "The Ontological Argument," in William J. Wainwright, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 80–115. (Synopses and analyses of several versions of the ontological argument.)
- Lowe, E. J. (2007) "The Ontological Argument," in Chad Meister and Paul Copan., eds. *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*. London: Routledge. (A clear, concise and supportive overview of the argument.)
- Martin, Michael (1990) *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. (A magisterial critique of theism; Chapter 3 includes responses to different versions of the ontological argument.)
- Oppy, Graham (1995) *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Contains detailed reconstructions of historical forms of the ontological argument along with objections.)
- Oppy, Graham (2008) "The Ontological Argument," in Paul Copan and Chad Meister, eds. *Philosophy of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Issues*. Oxford: Blackwell. (A valuable and terse overview and analysis of several different versions of the argument by a leading philosopher of religion.)
- Plantinga, Alvin, ed. (1965) *The Ontological Argument*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday. (A collection of important works on ontological arguments.)
- Plantinga, Alvin (1974) *The Nature of Necessity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (Includes a version of the ontological argument developed utilizing modal logic.)

WEBSITES

- <http://www.wakeup.org/anadolu/08/2/ontological.html>
Website of the "Ontological Argument Revisited by Two Ottoman Muslim Scholars," Prepared by Ümit Dericioglu.
- <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/anselm-critics.html>
"Philosophers' Criticisms of Anselm's Ontological Argument for the Being of God." Part of the *Internet Medieval Source Book* – a collection of public domain and copy-permitted texts related to medieval and Byzantine history.
- <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ontological-arguments/>
Encyclopedia of Religion article on the ontological argument by Graham Oppy; *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- <http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/theism/ontological.html>
Infidels.org website which contains a number of essays and links offering rebuttals to versions of the ontological argument.