

## The Ontological Argument

**Analyse and evaluate the claim “The Ontological Argument succeeds in proving the existence of God, rather than indicating the probability of God.”**

Unlike many other classical arguments for the existence of God, the argument from ontology attempts to prove the existence of God through rationality and language rather than sensory experience. At the heart of the argument is the notion that just as we *know* “all spinsters are unmarried women”, it is impossible to not conceive of the statement “God exists” being true.

The first version of the argument was established by St. Anselm of Canterbury in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. In his work ‘*Proslogion*’ Anselm first defines God as “*a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.*”<sup>1</sup> This definition is quite accepted by both atheists and theists, although the fact that God is defined in negative rather than positive terms doesn’t give us any more insight into God’s properties or attributes – he is simply that which is better than the best we can think of. Having made his definition of God, Anselm claims to conclude “God exists” by way of the following premises:

- God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived.
  - We can conceive of a God.
  - Reality is greater than conception.
- ∴ God must exist in order to be the greatest being that can be conceived.

By this argument, it logically follows that in order to be the greatest being that can be conceived, God must actually exist – otherwise he does not fulfil his definition and is therefore not God. This is known as the Ontos leap, as we manage to prove by use of language that something must necessarily exist. Anselm tries to explain this by use of his painter analogy, where he says the artist may have a mental image of his work in his head prior to painting it, but it does not *exist* and fulfil its potential greatness until he has actually painted it.

Perhaps ironically Anselm’s first critic was a catholic monk, Guanilio, who used a “Lost Island” analogy to try and demonstrate that the ability to necessitate something’s existence by merely conceiving of it is ridiculous. Guanilio invites us to imagine a perfect island, an island perfect in every way – by Anselm’s logic this island has necessary existence too.

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<sup>1</sup> *Proslogion Chapter II*, St Anselm

Anselm responded to Guanilio's criticism by rephrasing his argument in such a way as that it becomes clear that only God can possess all perfects, an Island simply *cannot* be perfect in every way, because only God possess all perfections. If God did not exist, he would not possess all perfects, therefore he would not be God. As Anselm says in 'Proslogion' Chapter 3, "if that greater than which cannot be thought can be thought of as not existing, then that greater than which cannot be thought of is not that greater than which cannot be thought"

In his work 'The Non-Existence of God' the philosopher Everett argues against the reformulation of *Proslogion* purporting that it was still defeated by Guanilio's criticism. Everett maintained that surely an island *can* be perfect; there must be a definitive version of an island that is perfect – but that does not mean such an island exists. The premise we are breaking down here is that "reality is greater than conception", for as Hume says "That idea of existence, when argued with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it"<sup>2</sup>

We can use the example of money to demonstrate that existence makes no addition to something's intrinsic value. If we conceive of a £10 note, then we are thinking of £10. If we are holding a £10 note, then we are holding £10. Whether or not the note exists does not alter what it is, it merely alters its relativistic value to us as humans (since imagining money doesn't make it very valuable to us, but what it *is* has not changed).

The 17<sup>th</sup> century rationalist René Descartes was a proponent of the ontological argument, he formed a new version of the argument based around the "essence" of God. Descartes' argument is based upon the following premises:

- Whatever belongs to the essential nature of something cannot be denied it.
  - God's essence includes existence.
- ∴ Existence must be affirmed of God.

The idea that we can know what God's essence is is a key flaw in this argument, again we see opposition coming from within the Christian faith, as Aquinas would suggest that God is transcendent – therefore we simply cannot know what his essence entails. Kant agrees with this idea, saying that we simply do not know what a necessary being is like – nor do we have any real way of knowing. Descartes attempts to use the same logic that necessitates a triangle having three sides (because three sides is the essence of a triangle) to say that God exists because his essence is existence, however Kant says that logic is only applicable to abstract concepts *like* mathematics, it cannot apply to objects because defining something cannot necessitate its existence.

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<sup>2</sup> A Treatise of Human Nature, Hume

As with the second formulation in *Proslogion* we can see that existence cannot be in the essence of anything according to Kant, because it makes no addition to the object in question. The concept of something does not alter whether it exists or not. If we eliminate the Descartes' premise "existence is in the essence of God", then his whole argument fails.

Norman Malcolm, the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher tried to bypass Kant's criticisms of the argument by focusing on the idea that God must have necessary existence, rather than perfection necessitating existence. He concludes that God's non-existence is impossible based on the attributes we understand God to possess, if we understand God to be transcendent and infinite we see that God has to exist, because for him not to exist would break that fact that God's very definition entails necessary existence.

Malcolm's argument is, however, defeated by Hume who says that necessary existence is an incoherent concept, all things are contingent and may just as equally exist as not exist. A further criticism would be the assumptions Malcolm makes about God in order for his argument to work. He assumes God to possess the attributes assigned to Him by Christianity; however we have no way of knowing if these are true or not.

A final reformulation of the argument comes from the modern thinker Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga looked at the idea that God has all perfections, and also at the idea of contingency and formed the following premises to support his conclusion:

- In a contingent universe there is a possible world in which resides a being with maximal greatness.
  - A being is only maximally great if it exists in all possible worlds.
  - Our universe is contingent.
- ∴ A being exists in our world with maximal greatness, He exists in all worlds, we call this being God.

The problem with this argument, although it seems to indicate that God exists without suggesting that his reality is greater than his concept, is that it has moved away from the deductive logic of the rest of the Ontological Argument to inductive knowledge. Just because there *may* be a world in which a maximally great being exists, it does not mean that world *does* exist. In this way we have reduced the argument to a probability of God's existence, rather than an irrefutable proof.

Anselm himself said "*Nor do I seek to understand so that I can believe, but rather I believe so that I can understand,*" and this idea that the argument is *based upon* faith not encouraging faith would tend to make the argument uninviting for the non-

believer. This has been a common weakness to the whole argument, Anselm seems to be seeking to justify his faith, rather than proving his faith from scratch.

Another underlying weakness to the argument is that it does not depend upon our experience, and whilst this may appeal to the rationalists, empiricism must have its part to play. The idea that we can prove something's existence, merely by thinking and defining that thing, is quite absurd to many people and unlikely to appeal, especially when other believers criticise the argument for the assumptions it makes about God, and on the basis we can *only* know God through revelation.

The Ontological argument evolves a lot over the course of its history, but by the end when we deal with Plantinga's argument we find that no longer are we dealing in the a posteriori fact we started out with, but inductive reasoning which can never give us more than a likely probability of something – not a deductive proof. It would therefore seem that the argument as a whole does not offer an absolute proof, it does make some worthwhile points, and Plantinga offers us a probability of God's existence, but its logic is based upon broken premises and it can offer no more than probability.