

The Ontological Argument

The ontological argument is one of the most interesting of all the arguments for the existence of God. Derived from the Greek word "ontos" which means "being," the ontological argument tries to show that a proper understanding of what it means for God to be or exist will demonstrate that he must exist. The ontological argument has often been said to ascertain God's existence by a philosophical sleight of hand or a ruse of words. Whether this is so I will leave up to the reader to decide.

Saint Anselm of Canterbury



Although inchoate forms of the ontological argument can be seen in earlier thinkers like Saint Augustine of Hippo, the first clear formulation of the ontological argument came from Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109). Anselm argued that once it is understood what it means to speak of God, then it would be clear that God must exist. This would be like once one knows what it means to speak of a triangle, it is clear that it must have exactly three sides. Anselm's logic is laid out in his book, [The Proslogion](#). Those who deny God's existence, if they knew that they were saying, actually know enough to prove God's existence according to Anselm. For even those who reject theism must have an idea or a definition of God. Anselm suggests that God is "a being which none greater can be conceived." So, atheists must say that the idea of God, a being which none greater can be conceived, exists only as an idea in their

minds but not in reality. At this point, Anselm thinks he has the atheist in a compromising position. For atheists say this being which none greater can be conceived exists only as a refuted idea in their head, but if God exists only as an idea in their heads then a greater being can be conceived, namely one that exists not just in the mind but one that exists in reality. Therefore, God must exist. Otherwise, we speak nonsense when we say God does not exist. Just like we would say someone didn't understand the idea of a triangle who said it has four sides. Anselm's argument might look like this formally:

1. God is a being which none greater can be conceived.
2. Even an atheist claims God exists as an idea in the mind.
3. However, God would be a better being if he existed in reality, not just as an idea.
4. Therefore, God must exist in reality, not just as an idea.

Anselm has had critics in just about every era, and the first one was a contemporary monk, Gaunilo. Gaunilo was concerned that Anselm was defining God into existence. His challenge showed that if one defined a perfect island as an island which none greater could be conceived, then it too must exist. However, it is ridiculous to believe that a perfect island must exist because it is defined this way. Likewise, Gaunilo claimed it seems ludicrous to believe Anselm proved God's existence with this definition.

The reply Anselm gave to Gaunilo seems to clarify how his ontological argument follows. Anselm replied that his proof uniquely applies to God for only a necessary being would have the greatest conceivable existence. For any given island, there can always be a better one. For example, consider the existence of the tallest possible man in Manhattan. No matter how tall you imagine one man, it is always possible to imagine another man at least an inch taller. Thus, it is nonsense to speak of the tallest possible man in Manhattan, and this conclusion will be the case for all finite and material beings. God is exempt from this fallacy because he has necessary existence and would qualify as the greatest of all possible beings. So, Anselm's argument remains unscathed by Gaunilo's criticism.

Immanuel Kant's Objection

The next important historical figure we shall survey in the historical discussion of the ontological argument is Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant does not seem to show familiarity with Anselm's version of the ontological argument, and it appears that he is responding to its less impressive forms found in the writings of René Descartes and Christian Wolff. Nonetheless, his objection has historical significance and is often cited by contemporary philosophers as good reason to reject the ontological argument. Whether this is the case I shall leave for my audience to decide for themselves.

Kant's objection to the ontological argument is that existence is not a property that can be attributed to beings like we can attribute other properties such as being blue, hard, or round. When we talk about entities existing, Kant contends that we do not mean to add existence as a property to their beings. In other words, the objection seems to be that one cannot go around adding existence as a property to God (or anything else for that matter) in order to define God (or anything else) into existence. Just as defining my bedroom as such a place that contains millions of dollars would not mean that a careful understanding of that definition of my room would really make it so. In order to see if that definition is true, we should go look at my room and see if it is accurate. Similarly, a definition of God must be checked with reality to see if it is correct.

Although Kant's objection has been influential and receives credence to this very day, it has been found unsatisfactory by some philosophers. For example, some thinkers controversially believe that existence can be thought of as a unique property. Alvin Plantinga has forcefully argued that Kant's objection does not conflict with anything in Anselm's argument. For Anselm does not contingently add existence as a property to God and define him into existence. Naturally these objections are contentious, which adds to the intrigue of the ontological argument.

Contemporary Views

After Kant the ontological argument had been laid to rest. However, Norman Malcolm, a prominent contemporary philosopher, revived the ontological argument with his new interpretation. Malcolm suggests that Anselm's *Proslogion* actually contains two ontological arguments. The first argument follows the lines of a "great-making" property, which Malcolm thinks is fallacious following Kant's objection. However, he thinks the second argument is cogent. The second argument according to Malcolm follows from the idea of a necessary being. A necessary being exists in all possible worlds, so if it is possible for it to exist, then it must exist. So if God is a necessary being, then he must exist if it is possible for him to exist. Likewise, as a necessary being God's non-existence would only follow if it is impossible for him to exist. Malcolm's argument might look like this:

- A. God is a necessary being.
- B. If God's existence is possible, then he must exist.
- C. If God's existence is impossible, then he cannot exist.
- D. God's existence is possible.
- E. Therefore, God must exist.

This argument seems to be sound, but it will remain unconvincing to those who are willing to accept that God's existence is impossible. This would be tantamount to a denial of premise D. Nonetheless, if Malcolm's argument is legit, then it forces the atheist into a difficult predicament. Rather than claiming God's existence is not probable, the atheist must make the harder case that God's existence is impossible.

The last philosopher I wish to consider is Alvin Plantinga who has written extensively on the ontological argument as well as the metaphysics of ontology. Plantinga's formulation of the argument follows from logical semantics of possible worlds. Plantinga believes that if in any possible world it is possible to instantiate a being with maximal greatness, then it would be necessarily true for that being to have maximal greatness in every world. Thus, it would be impossible for a being with maximal greatness to fail to exist. An abbreviated version of his argument might look like this:



- I. There is a possible world where a being has maximal greatness.
- II. Necessarily, a being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in all possible worlds.
- III. Necessarily, a being is maximally excellent in all possible worlds only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection.
- IV. It would be impossible for a being with maximal greatness not to exist in any possible world.
- V. Therefore, a being of maximal greatness exists in all possible worlds.

Plantinga is careful to admit that his argument will only be convincing to those who believe that premise I is acceptable, which he knows will only be acceptable to those who already believe in God. However, Plantinga thinks this argument still has some philosophical value. For even though it probably will not persuade anyone to become a theist, it demonstrates that theism is rational, which is no trivial conclusion.

Conclusion

I have never met a person who was convinced to believe in God by studying the finer points of the ontological argument. Nonetheless, I think there can be some significant insights we can learn from this argument. Karl Barth suggested that the Anselm's ontological argument is not an attempt to persuade atheists to believe in God, but that it is a devotional exercise for those who already have faith in God. Although I think that Barth misses Anselm's overall aim, there is an important aspect of personal reflection that I think theists, atheists, and agnostics can all benefit by pondering the definition of God as a being which none greater can be conceived. The important questions the ontological argument makes us face are: What do I mean by the word "God"? Is God's existence possible or impossible? Is it possible for God not to exist? Is belief in God irrational? The answers to these momentous questions I will leave up to you to decide.

Books for Further Reading

[Proslogion \(with Gaunilo's response\)](#) by Anselm. Chapters 1-5 from the *Proslogion* are the focus of Anselm's formulation of the ontological argument. Both Anselm and Gaunilo are readable, and understanding the *Proslogion* and Gaunilo's response is necessary for anyone who wants to have a masterful grasp of this argument.

[God, Freedom, & Evil](#) by Alvin Plantinga. This is one of the main works where Alvin Plantinga lays out his interpretation of the ontological argument. It is philosophically steep, but a careful and interested reader will be able to understand this work.

[The Question of God](#) by Michael Palmer. This book is written from a "neutral perspective" and includes the main primary sources and a summary of the main issues. It has chapters on all the theistic arguments, and I thought its treatment of the ontological argument was good.
