

Navigating a way through the Ontological Argument

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With so much material available on the Ontological Argument one of the biggest challenges students face is trying to develop effective strategies for imposing a sense of order and structure upon their investigations. In this brief article I would like to offer the following as a guide to help in this particular area. In doing so I suggest investigations are broken down under six headings;

1. The forms or versions of the argument.
2. Its features and characteristics
3. The key concepts and ideas contained in the argument
4. The key criticisms of the argument.
5. Its merits as a case for God
6. Finally the all important question 'Does it work'? Can you evaluate points 4 and 5 to reach a reasoned conclusion based on argument and evidence?

1. Forms or versions of the argument

There are many but in this article I shall concentrate on four; two from Anselm, one from Descartes and then a modern version of the argument. Stating an argument 'formally' can be a helpful and effective way of cutting through the many layers of prose in order to identify more succinctly the essence of the case.

Anselm's first version stated formally;

Premise 1	God is That than which none greater can be conceived
Premise 2	Formal existence is greater than intentional existence
Conclusion	God exists in reality.

Anselm's argument found in Proslogion is arguably the most famous. It is worth noting that Anselm actually presents two distinct versions. Anselm (1033 – 1109) was Archbishop of Canterbury and his versions of the argument come as part of a prayer to God. Having established the existence of God in 'Monologion', in 'Proslogion' Anselm contemplates the nature of the God he already believes exists. Anselm was influenced by the Platonic worldview and in particular Plato's 'Theory of Forms'. He believed the perfect forms of love, goodness, truth and beauty resides in God and it is God himself who bestows man with the ability to discern such aesthetic ideas. This very principle alone led Anselm to posit the existence of God.

'But just as it has been proved that there is a 'Being' that is supremely good, since all goods are good through a single Being, which is good through itself so it is necessarily inferred that there is something supremely great which is great through itself.' (1)

Reflecting on God's essence (or Ontos) Anselm concludes that by his very nature God is to be understood as a Being than which none greater can be conceived. Even the atheist, the 'Fool' who says in his heart there is no God understands and shares the same definition. Therefore Anselm's first premise is established. He then compares a God who simply existed in the mind with one who existed in reality as well as the mind and asks which would be greater? Arguing that it is greater to exist both in the mind and in reality rather than in the mind alone Anselm concludes God exists.

Anselm's second version stated formally

Premise 1	God is that than which none greater can be conceived
Premise 2	Necessary existence is greater than contingent existence
Therefore	God necessarily exists.

Anselm also reflects upon the 'type' or 'form' of existence in reality that God possesses. Everything else that exists in reality does so contingently. In other words it is dependent upon something else – it is caused. There was a time when it didn't exist and there will be a time in the future when it won't exist. If one compares this with uncaused, necessary existence Anselm concludes that it would be greater for God to be necessary, in other words to be uncaused, to have always existed and always will exist. This leads to the second form of the argument.

Note it was this second version which Anselm believed overcame Gaunilo's attempted 'reductio ad absurdum' in the form of his perfect island (more on this later in this article).

Descartes' version stated formally

Premise 1:	God is the Supremely perfect Being
Premise 2	Existence is a necessary property of perfection.
Conclusion	God therefore exists

Rene Descartes (1596 – 1650) provides a form of the argument in 'Meditation 5'. His scepticism, later referred to as 'Cartesian Doubt' was concerned with the pursuit of certainty and exactitude. He wrote in 'Discourse on the Method' that he sought to 'cast aside the loose earth and sand so as to come upon rock or clay.' His starting point therefore was to doubt everything that it was 'reasonable' to doubt and what one was left with was logically secure. This process of doubting famously led to his concluding he was certain of his own existence via the cogito principle 'I think therefore I am'. As a rationalist, Descartes questioned the reliability of empiricism as such evidence could always be questioned. His rationalist approach favoured a priori, analytic propositions that were de dicto true.

Descartes defined God as the supremely perfect Being and as such God logically had to possess the requisite attributes of perfection. If God lacked existence then Descartes argued he would be lacking a notable perfection. Therefore God had to exist. Using his mathematical background to illustrate further, a triangle must have 3 sides and internal angles adding up to 180 degrees as these are necessary properties of 'triangularity'. So too God must have the necessary properties of the divine and this included existence. Quoting Descartes

'Existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle.' (2)

A modern 'alternative' approach

The American philosopher Norman Malcolm (1911 – 1990), reflecting on Anselm's second version put forward a modern form of the argument. He defined God as 'An absolutely unlimited Being' therefore not bound by the physical restrictions of time and space. He then applied the notion of necessary existence to this Being. When asked to consider the proposition 'God Necessarily exists' this type of analytic statement is absolute – there are no 'shades of grey' where one might argue perhaps yes or perhaps no. As a 'Necessary / Analytic' statement it is either absolutely true or absolutely false; God's necessary existence is either logically certain or logically impossible. Malcolm reasoned that God's necessary existence was not logically impossible as it did not contain a contradiction such as the notion of a round square. As there is no inherent contradiction then the statement 'God necessarily exists' is not logically impossible and must therefore be logically true.

2. Features and characteristics

It is here that the distinctive nature of the Ontological Argument becomes clear. Other approaches to demonstrating the existence of God such as the Design and Cosmological Arguments use as their starting point observations about the world around us and from these observations they posit God as the most reasonable explanation. How can one best explain the existence of a contingent universe or a world exhibiting elements of apparent design? Supporters will point to God as the most reasonable explanation.

However, that is the most they can claim. Their very structure, their features and characteristics mean that they support the existence of God without guaranteeing it. The Ontological Argument is different. If successful it provides a logical demonstration of the existence of God.

The Ontological Argument is 'a priori' in approach. This means that by its very nature it seeks to demonstrate the truth of its claim prior to any experience of reality. This is in contrast with a posteriori arguments which seek to suggest the validity of their conclusions based upon the subjective interpretation of empirical data. The conclusion of the Ontological Argument is claimed to be objectively true and is not dependent upon any aspect of the real world which may be open to spurious statements of opinion.

Linked to the above this approach argues de dicto for God. In other words it is based upon the definition of the words 'God' and 'existence'. Proponents such as Anselm argued that once one understands the meaning of the word 'God' then one understands that such a Being exists. It was this that led him to refer to the atheist as the Fool precisely because to reject the existence of God is essentially to fail to properly understand the definition. If God is to be defined as 'That than which none greater can be conceived' then as far as Anselm is concerned his existence in reality is an indisputable element of that very definition.

The Ontological Argument is also a deductive approach. The Design and Cosmological Arguments are inductive meaning their conclusions are supported by the premises but not guaranteed. It is possible for the premises to be true but the conclusion still rejected. For example, the existence of the world and the universe might reasonably suggest the existence of God but one cannot say more than this as the conclusion is suggested but not guaranteed by the premises. The Ontological Argument takes the form of a valid deductive argument. For example

Premise 1	God is 'That than which none greater can be conceived'
Premise 2	Formal existence is greater than intentional existence
Conclusion	God exists in reality.

It is a valid argument as the conclusion follows logically from and is contained within the premises. Therefore if the premises are true then the conclusion is certain. In this sense it is a genuine 'proof'.

3. Concepts and Ideas

What are the key concepts and ideas contained in the Ontological Argument? An examination of the premises makes clear at the heart of the argument is a particular view of 'God' and 'Existence'.

Where 'God' is concerned the argument rests on the initial idea that there is a known and agreed definition of God. Anselm makes this clear in 'Proslogion' with his assertion that the 'Fool' accepts the definition of God but then fails to understand the significance of the definition. Descartes too, writing centuries later felt certain that, despite his working scepticism, the existence of God was intrinsic to his nature.

A central idea contained within the argument is that existence can function as a predicate. This is the essence of Gaunilo's *reductio ad absurdum* where he uses the example of his perfect island. Kant too is a famous critic of this idea observing that existence is required for any predicates to be in place rather than merely being just another quality that something can possess and this is a theme we will return to later in the article.

The argument also wants to claim that formal existence is greater than intentional existence. If something exists in the mind alone it cannot have the same efficacy or potency as something that exists both in the mind and in reality. It is limited as it only resides in the mind. The cure for cancer will only be effective when it exists in reality; the winning lottery ticket in my pocket is greater than one in my mind and the idea of a bullet heading toward me is not as powerful as one in reality. Based upon this reasoning, Anselm argues that as God is 'That than which nothing greater can be conceived' then he must, de dicto, possess formal existence otherwise I could conceive of a God that did and that would make this being greater than God which is de dicto impossible. However, this idea also rests on the assertion that 'existence' can function as a predicate. Anselm is attempting to compare two qualities, existence in reality and existence in the mind and say that

the former is greater than the latter. However, critics might claim that existence is not a quality at all and that mental existence is nothing at all. Therefore perhaps the Ontological Argument attempts to compare something that is not a quality with nothing at all!!

A further claim central to the reasoning contained within the argument is the idea that necessary existence is a coherent concept. For many linguistic philosophers the only necessary truths are contained in either mathematical assertions or analytic statements. That $2+2=4$ is undeniably true and the statement 'It is either raining or it isn't' is indeed self evidently the case (I do remember watching the weather forecast some time ago when the reporter informed the watching audience that there was a 50% chance of rain!). However, statements such as these do not tell us anything about reality.

The conclusion to the argument is based upon the idea that the statement 'God exists' is an analytic proposition. However, as has already been noted such statements deal with ideas, concepts and definitions and not the real world. According to many critics of the argument the conclusion that it reaches, 'God exists', is merely a tautology – a repetitive definition. In other words it takes an alleged predicate that is already contained in the definition of the subject and then reasserts it. For example, 'John is an unmarried bachelor'. This is a tautology as the state of unmarriedness is already contained within the meaning of the word bachelor. The statement is necessarily true but the use of unmarried adds nothing new to our understanding of John as a bachelor. By including his existence in the definition of God, Anselm is perhaps asserting 'The existing God exists.' As critics have observed one cannot define something into existence.

4. Key Criticisms of the Argument

As a valid deductive approach criticisms of the argument will focus upon one or other of the underpinning premises, that is, they will attack the definition of God employed in the argument or its view of existence.

Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, a contemporary of Anselm, wrote 'On behalf of the fool' who claims there is no God. Gaunilo employed the same reasoning as Anselm in an attempt to move from the idea of a perfect island to its existence in reality. He was attempting to demonstrate that Anselm's reasoning could be used to demonstrate the existence of the greatest 'X' where 'X' could be anything and that this was clearly absurd. However, for Anselm, islands are temporal contingent things whose relative greatness is subjective. One person's definition of the perfect island might not be the same as the next persons. God's definition is absolute and agreed therefore, *de dicto* only God could exist necessarily! Something like an island is by definition finite and therefore cannot be limitless in its greatness. Anselm contends that once we understand who God is we cannot deny his existence. However, it is worth observing that despite this Gaunilo points out that we cannot actually understand the nature of God, a criticism developed later by Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) was an early critic of the argument. Unlike Anselm who was a Platonist, Aquinas held an Aristotelian worldview which was based upon the premise that arguments for God had to be a posteriori in approach rather than a priori. He rejected the essence of Anselm's claim by insisting that due to God's aseity it was easier to say what he wasn't (the *Via Negativa*) rather than what he actually was. Certainly the notion that one could encapsulate the essence of God in human terms was untenable in his view. For Aquinas we can only reason to God indirectly from the effects of divine action in the world. It was this conviction that led Aquinas to his a posteriori approach to God found in his 'Five Ways.' Furthermore even if one hypothesises a definition for God there is no mechanism for verifying it. God's existence may well be self-evident to God but not to man.

Many of the most familiar criticisms of the argument are variations of the now infamous assertion 'Existence is not a predicate.' As already noted Anselm's argument was attacked by a contemporary monk Gaunilo. Employing a form of 'reductio ad absurdum' Gaunilo attempted to demonstrate a fundamental flaw in Anselm's reasoning and in so doing highlighting that one cannot define something into existence.

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) was perhaps the most famous proponent of this criticism. Commenting upon Descartes' version of the argument in his 'Critique of Pure Reason' he observed

'To posit a triangle, and yet to reject its three angles is self-contradictory; but there is no contradiction in rejecting the triangle together with its three angles.' (3)

In other words once you have accepted the subject 'triangle' you must accept its necessary properties. However, there is no contradiction in rejecting both the subject and all its necessary properties. If there is a God then he must possess the necessary properties of God but there is no contradiction in simply saying there is no God. To claim 'X' exists is actually imparting information about the real world and not about the essence of 'X'. Adding 'exists' to a list of properties of 'X' imparts no new information. Furthermore if you want to check whether such a statement is true you must do so empirically!

'Whatever, and however much, our concept of an object may contain, we must go outside it if we are to ascribe existence to this object.' (4)

Kant also highlights a further flaw in the argument. Specifically the fact that it is illegitimate to posit the necessary existence of God when discussing his possible existence.

In a similar vein, David Hume (1711 – 1776) observed that 'All existential statements are synthetic' and therefore, for him, the Ontological Argument failed. Existence is always contingent and to say 'X' exists, whatever 'X' may be will always require empirical verification. Such statements may or may not be true and they are certainly not de dicto true. It is necessarily true that the definition of bachelor includes the state of 'unmarriedness' and that triangles must have 3 sides but this is not to say that either bachelors or triangles exist in reality. Put simply 'Nothing necessarily exists.' The Ontological Argument wants to claim nothing necessarily exists - apart from God!

Years later Bertrand Russell (1872 – 1970) developed Kant's assessment of the nature of existence. He observed that although the word 'exists' is grammatically a predicate logically it performs a different function. It is not simply another quality that God may possess for logically if a Being does not exist then it possesses no properties whatsoever.

In his first version, Anselm makes the claim that to exist in reality (in re) is greater than to exist in the mind alone (in intellectu). Underlying this is the notion that if one understands an idea or concept then that constitutes a form of existence. Is this really the case? Is Anselm comparing a Being God possessing mental existence with a Being God possessing actual existence? One might reasonably contend that what is really happening is that the 'concept God' is being compared with the 'being God'. One is not therefore comparing two different modes of existence but rather a concept with a being. God inside my head is not a Being – he is a concept. Consider the following;

I have an idea of a fluffy cat
I have an idea of a Great God.

Existence is no more or less necessary for God to be great than it is for my cat to be fluffy. Cats are only fluffy if they exist and Gods are only great if they exist. When I conceive of a fluffy cat in my mind I am referring to the concept of a cat and not a cat itself. The concept is not fluffy as it has no physical properties – it can't have as it's a concept. When I conceive of a great God in my mind I am referring to a concept of God and not to God himself. The concept is not great as it has no physical properties – it's a concept! Therefore minds do not conceive Beings they conceive concepts of Beings. God does not exist in my mind but rather the concept of God does. The Ontological Argument is perhaps successful in demonstrating that God is the greatest conceivable concept not the greatest conceivable Being.

A further variation on this analysis of the argument's use of existence is found in the oft written expression that the conclusion to the argument is a tautology. If we illustrate the point further

John is a bachelor **who doesn't have a wife**
It is 4 a.m. **in the morning**
The square on the page **has four sides**

When you consider the writing in ***bold italics*** it is clear that it adds nothing to our understanding of the subject, it imparts no new information but merely repeats something already established within the definition of the subject. Any a priori, de dicto approach such as the Ontological Argument is bound to lead to a tautology. Therefore if one chooses to define God as existing then of course God exists – to deny this would be nonsensical. But what is actually being asserted is that the God I choose to define as existing, exists, or ‘the existing God exists’.

5. Strengths of the argument

This can present a significant challenge to students of the argument. As the conclusion comes in the form of an analytic and necessary proposition then it is either absolutely right or absolutely wrong and critics have over the centuries been effective in highlighting why the argument fails. What are the strengths of an argument that fails? I would suggest there are two areas one might usefully refer to at this point.

One approach has been elucidated by Peter Vardy. Following a shift in understanding language associated initially with Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951), Vardy applies an Anti-Realist approach to the argument. Anti-Realism adopts a coherence theory of meaning whereby language is comprehensible not merely through empiricism and correspondence but also by cohering with other terms and ideas in a given ‘form of life’. Such language may be non-cognitive but its meaning remains clear to those who use it. Citing prime numbers to illustrate the point Vardy observes that while they do not exist in reality as such once you understand their meaning they become real for you. Similarly once one understands what believers mean when they speak of the necessary existence of God then such language becomes comprehensible. In this sense God is ‘real’ within the form of life of religion but that is not to say there is a Being in reality that corresponds to the word ‘God’.

A second area that one might usefully comment upon is the relationship between the conclusion to the argument and faith. It should be remembered that Proslogion follows on from Anselm’s initial prayer on the subject ‘Monologion’. Here Anselm, writing in the Platonic tradition, links the existence of God with the realm of forms and in particular the notion that God is the perfect form of ‘good’. Therefore for Anselm, God’s existence has already been established prior to ‘Proslogion’. However, contemporary critics would criticise such methodology and would certainly contest the claims that its conclusions are de dicto true. They may well appear certain through the eyes of faith but that is not to say they have been demonstrated objectively. Anselm presents his Ontological Argument as part of a prayer. He himself observed

‘I believe this too, that unless I first believe I shall not understand.’ (5)

Perhaps this is where the appeal of the argument lies. For those who already believe then the argument helps to cement that commitment to God. Through the eyes of faith God’s existence may well appear certain but such propositions will not convince the atheist. The fact that something appears on a personal level to be self-evidently true is not to say it actually is so. Similar assertions in the life of the believer may feel certain but they remain expressions of faith rather than factual propositions.

6. Does it work?

On one level it is perfectly reasonable to maintain that the argument fails as a logical demonstration of the necessary existence of God. But as stated above, when seen through the eyes of the faith community then perhaps it succeeds in serving a different purpose. One might look no further than Anselm’s motto **‘Fides quaerens intellectum’** translated as **‘Faith seeking understanding’**. For Anselm faith preceded understanding and the content of the argument was an expression of his love of God and his desire to comprehend as fully as possible the Being he committed his life to serving.

References

(1) Proslogium; Monologium; ‘An appendix in Behalf of the Fool’ Anselm

- (2) 'On the Fifth Meditation' Descartes
- (3) 'Critique of Pure Reason' Kant
- (4) 'Critique of Pure Reason' Kant
- (5) 'Discourse Proslogion' Anselm