

A quick overview

- The Ontological Argument is an a priori argument which attempts to prove God's existence through the meaning of the word 'God'
- It defines God as 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived.'
- It is also:
- A **deductive** argument - the conclusion necessarily follows from the premises. If the premises are true then the conclusion must follow.
- An **analytic** argument - the truth (or falsity) of an analytic statement is completely determined by the meanings of the words and symbols used to express it
- a **a priori** – known to be true independently of experience.

In support of the Argument

St. Anselm

- Anselm defined God as '**that than which nothing greater can be conceived.**' This means that God exists in the mind and reality as well.
- Such a being must exist in reality because existence in reality is greater than that which exists only in the mind.

(i) First Form – a formal deductive argument:

- Premise 1 God is the greatest possible being (nothing greater can be conceived)
- Premise 2 If God exists in the mind alone (only as an idea), then a greater being can be imagined to exist both in the mind and in reality
- Premise 3 This being would then be greater than God
- Premise 4 Thus God cannot exist only as an idea in the mind
- Conclusion** Therefore, God exists both in the mind (as an idea) and in reality.

(ii) Second Form:

- God is the greatest possible being (nothing greater can be conceived)
- It is greater to be a 'necessary' being (cannot not be) than a contingent being (can cease to exist)
- If God exists only as a contingent being, then a greater non-contingent being could be imagined
- This being would then be greater than God
- To be the greatest, therefore, God must be non-contingent
- God is also a 'necessary being, since no other being could have created him and he cannot be made to cease to exist.

Descartes

Descartes distinguished between a thing's essence and its existence. He argued it was possible to determine what the essential nature of something was (its essence) independently of knowing whether it existed. He used the illustration of a triangle whose essence was three angles that added up to 180 degrees. The idea of the triangle could not be separated from the idea of the three angles. However that does not demand that triangles actually exist.

However, as Descartes could conceive of his own existence, he could also conceive of the existence of a perfect being. When he considered the idea of a supremely perfect being, he argued that existence was an aspect of perfection. In other words, the idea of a supremely perfect being was the unique case where existence was part of its essence, and therefore demanded that such a being existed.

1. I exist
2. In my mind I have the concept of a supremely perfect being
3. Existence is a perfection, so existence is part of its essence
4. A supremely perfect being must exist in order to be supremely perfect
5. Therefore, a supremely perfect being exists

Norman Malcolm

Norman Malcolm (1911-1990) developed Anselm's second form. He rejected Anselm's first form since it implied that existence was a property and Malcolm did not think existence was a property (similar view to Kant). However, the second form involved necessary existence and Malcolm did regard this as a property and so not open to Kant's criticisms.

Malcolm avoids the language of greatness that Anselm used, and instead defines God as "an unlimited being". One characteristic of an unlimited being would be necessary existence since an unlimited being cannot be dependent on anything – either for coming into existence or ceasing to exist.

Hence God's existence is either impossible (since he could not be brought into existence by anything greater than himself) or God is necessary (since he cannot be brought into existence as he must always have existed). But God's existence cannot be impossible since the only thing to make it impossible would be in the notion was logically contradictory, which it is not. Therefore God must be necessary and so must exist.

For discussion:

In what ways are the views of Anselm and Descartes (i) similar and (ii) different?

Which is the most convincing and why?

In what ways are they similar?

- They all have in common the fact that they seek to prove the existence of God
- Some are **deductive** – the conclusion necessarily follows from the premises. If the premises are true then the conclusion must follow
- Others are **analytical** – the truth (or falsity) of an analytic statement is completely determined by the meanings of the words and symbols used to express it
- They are all **a priori** – known to be true independently of experience

In what ways are they different?

- They define God differently. Anselm – that than which nothing greater can be conceived. Descartes – a supremely perfect being.
- Anselm has no theory of absolute objective greatness. It is more that existing in reality is greater than existing as an idea. There is no concept of total greatness of which existence is an aspect. Descartes does have a theory of absolute objective perfection. Existence is an aspect of the concept of total perfection.

Challenges to the Ontological Argument

Gaunilo

Gaunilo attacked the Anselm form of the ontological argument

Replacing the word 'God' with 'the greatest conceivable lost island' led to an argument which had the same form as Anselm's, with true premises, and yet which leads to a false conclusion:

1. I can conceive of a 'lost island' that than which no greater island can be thought
2. Such an island must possess all greatness
3. It is greater to exist in reality than just in the mind
4. Therefore the 'lost island' must exist in reality

Replies to Gaunilo's criticism

1. However, this is not necessarily true. Anselm is speaking about God as 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived', whereas Gaunilo is talking about a lost island and Plantinga pointed out that we can always think of a greater island (eg. one which is bigger, has more trees etc.). An island cannot have an 'intrinsic maximum'.
2. Necessary existence is part of the concept of God whereas it is not part of the concept of the greatest conceivable lost island. Therefore, there is no contradiction in saying

the island does not exist BUT there is a contradiction in saying God does not exist as it is equivalent of saying that 'an existing God does not exist.'

For discussion;

In your opinion, which of the criticisms is the most convincing? Why?

Kant

Kant attacked Descartes form of the ontological argument, but it also applies to Anselm's form.

Kant challenged Descartes view that God's existence was a necessary predicate. He said:

- 'Existence is not a real predicate.' It does not add anything to the concept.
- More recently, a similar criticism centres around first and second order predicates. The former tell us about the nature of something eg. 'the cat is black'. The latter tell us about concepts eg. 'there are lots of cats'.

It is argued that Anselm and Descartes wrongly defined existence as a first order predicate when it really is a second-order concept. Existence is the property of a concept not of an object. Hence the affirmation of existence is nothing more than the denial of the number zero. Existence is not something that can be added to or subtracted from something.

We do not add anything when we declare that it 'is'. In the sentence 'God exists', the subject is really 'the concept of God' and the predicate 'exists' means that 'the concept of God applies to something.' Existence is not a property.

- The real contains no more than the merely possible, so a concept is not made more perfect (or greater) by adding reality.

Another criticism by Kant attacked Descartes form of the ontological argument. It concerned the rejection of both subject and predicate:

- If you have a triangle, then you must have three angles.
- But there is no contradiction in rejecting the triangle with its three angles.
- If you do not have a triangle, then you don't have three angles.
- Likewise, if there is no God, then there is no being with necessary existence.
- If God exists he will have necessary existence, but it is not a contradiction to say that such a concept does not have an actuality.

Replies to Kant's criticism

1. Necessary existence is a property of an inability to be generated or made corrupt
2. Stephen Davis argued that existence is a great making quality since the existence of money in reality rather than just the concept of money in my mind, permits me to purchase real items in the real world.

Key words

A deductive argument – an argument in which, if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true.

A priori – prior to experience.

Predicate – something that adds to our concept of the subject

Necessary being – a being whose non-existence is logically impossible. This is different from the cosmological usage which refers to factual necessity

Contingent being – a being that need not be, that could have been different, something that has dependency.

Analytic – a statement in which the predicate is contained in the subject.

Synthetic – a statement in which the predicate is not contained in the subject.

Essence - the essential nature of something.

Ontological - relating to the nature of being.

Existential - relating to existence

The Ontological Argument – Questions

1. Name 5 philosophers/scholars connected with the cosmological arguments AND state whether each supports or challenges the argument.
2. Explain the difference between
 - i. Inductive argument and deductive argument
 - ii. Anselm's definition of God and Descartes definition of God.
 - iii. Anselm's argument and Descartes argument
3. 'Anselm's ontological argument seems to claim that 'God exists' is an analytic existential proposition.' Explain what this means.
4. Explain why the ontological argument is the only classical argument for God's existence that could be a proof that God exists.
5. Many philosophers argue that propositions about existence are not analytic but synthetic and contingent. Explain
 - i. what they mean and
 - ii. whether you agree with them (giving your reasons).
6. Write an answer to the question:
'Descartes' ontological argument for the existence of God has more strengths than weaknesses'. To what extent do you agree?

Answers

1.
Anselm – support
Descartes – support
Malcolm - support
Gaunilo – challenges
Kant – challenges

2.

- i. Inductive arguments can provide support for the conclusion whilst deductive arguments may provide absolute proof for conclusion. In an inductive argument, if all the premises are true then the conclusion could still be false. Whilst in a deductive argument, if all the premises are true then the conclusion must also be true.
- ii. Anselm – that than which nothing greater can be conceived. Descartes – a supremely perfect being.
- iii. Anselm has no theory of absolute objective greatness. It is more that existing in reality is greater than existing as an idea. There is no concept of total greatness of which existence is an aspect. Descartes does have a theory of absolute objective perfection. Existence is an aspect of the concept of total perfection.

3.

Existence is part of the concept of God. The predicate 'exist' does not contain any new information, since the predicate is contained in the subject. Therefore, it is an analytic proposition that is about existence.

4.

It is the only deductive argument, and only deductive arguments offer philosophical proof. Inductive arguments offer only probabilities.

5.

- i. Synthetic means that the predicate is not contained in the subject and contingent means there is no necessity. Therefore, God may or may not have existence.
- ii. If you think God exists is analytic then you probably think that either God is a special case of an analytic existential proposition or that there are examples of analytic existential propositions. If you think it is synthetic then you probably think the ontological argument fails.

6.

Check that in your answer:

- i. you have – identified both the strengths and the weaknesses; discussed their relative weightings; reached some conclusion; justified that conclusion by means of a reasoned argument
- ii. you have NOT – rehearsed the ontological argument; listed in one paragraph the strengths and in another the weaknesses without any discussion of their relative weightings; given a conclusion which has not been clearly justified.