

THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

INTRODUCTION

Ontology is the philosophical study of 'being' or 'existence'. The ontological argument is attributed to the Christian theologian Saint Anselm (1033 - 1109), who explored it in his work, *'Proslogion'* (1077-78).

The ontological aims to prove God exists through the basic logic that, for God to be all the things we perceive Him to be He must firstly **EXIST**.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

1. Saint Anselm

The following explains Anselm's reasoning:

- God is that being than which no greater can be conceived.
- It is greater to exist in reality than merely as an idea.
- If God does not exist, we can conceive of an even greater being, that is one that does exist.
- Therefore, God must indeed exist in reality.

To help understand Anselm created an analogy of a painting:

- The painter knows what he is going to paint before he paints it
- It exists in his understanding
- When he paints it, it then exists in his understanding and in reality

IMPORTANT:

Anselm is NOT saying *'because I think of God, he must exist.'*

Anselm IS saying, *'It is when I think of him, I realise the necessity of God's existence. Existence imposes itself on my thoughts - rather than my thoughts imposing existence of God.'*

In summary, you cannot have the concept of God without being compelled to accept his existence. Also, you cannot deny his existence without having the concept of him.

2. René Descartes

The 17th century French philosopher, René Descartes, doubted he knew anything. Then realised that the ONLY thing he could know was that he was thinking and, famously concluding, *cogito ergo sum*; 'I think, therefore I am'.

Descartes further developed Anselm's argument, through defining God as a 'Supremely Perfect' being.

In his book, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes defined God as perfect, and argued that God must exist, as existence is a needed to establish perfection.

- Because God is a supremely perfect being, he possesses all perfections.
- This perfect state includes existence, which is a perfection in itself. Existence is a predicate of a perfect being.
- Therefore, God exists.

Descartes said that God not existing would be like a triangle not having three sides and, therefore, logically impossible.

Perfection is part of existence and both must go together, with God the 'Supremely Perfect' being above all others.

3. Norman Malcolm

The American philosopher Norman Malcolm (1911-1990) presented a modern version of the ontological argument. He believes that Anselm is saying that God must exist because the concept of God is the concept of a being whose existence is necessary.

Malcolm developed Anselm's argument, setting out his beliefs in his book, *Anselm's Ontological Arguments* (1960), as follows:

'If God, a being greater than which nothing can be conceived, does not exist then he cannot come into existence. For if He did He would either have been caused to come into existence or have happened to come into existence, and in either case He would be a limited being, which by our conception of Him He is not. Since He cannot come into existence, if He does not exist His existence is impossible. If he does exist, he cannot have come into existence ... nor can He cease to exist, for nothing could cause Him to cease to exist. So, if God exists His existence is necessary.'

CRITICISM OF THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

1. Guanilo of Marmoutiers: *'Lost Island'*

Gaunilo was a contemporary of St. Anselm. He is famous for developing the *'Lost Island'* counterargument. It was not that he didn't believe in God; he was a French Benedictine monk, so this couldn't be further from the truth. He just disagreed with Anselm's argument.

In his thesis, *'In Behalf of the Fool'*, he maintained that the ontological argument failed because logic of the same kind would mean we would have to accept many other things exist, when clearly, they do not.

When we consider that Guanilo was an empiricist - he held that we can only understand things that our sense provides us with information about - it becomes clear as to why he might disagree with Anselm.

By using the same reasoning as Anselm, he argued that if God exists simply because we perceive Him to, then he could show anything could exist, including the perfect, most splendid island.

The table below demonstrates this:

Anselm	Guanilo
God is that being than which no greater can be conceived.	The Lost Island is that island than which no greater can be conceived.
It is greater to exist in reality than merely as an idea.	It is greater to exist in reality than merely as an idea.
If God does not exist, we can conceive of an even greater being, that is one that does exist.	If the Lost Island does not exist, we can conceive of an even greater island, that is one that does exist.
Therefore, God must indeed exist in reality.	Therefore, the Lost Island must indeed exist in reality.
Therefore, He exists.	Therefore, it exists.

The biggest problem here, as pointed out by Guanilo, is that this island doesn't exist, even though the logical argument would suggest it did.

Anselm's response was to say that Guanilo had missed the point.

2. Kant

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), was a German philosopher who famously claimed in his *'Critique of Pure Reason'* (1781) that ontological arguments are spoiled by their reliance upon the assumption that existence is firmly established.

Kant objected to Descartes by saying that you can give something a definition but whether that exists is a different subject altogether.

3. Bertrand Russell

The English philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) also disagreed with the ontological argument. He stated that the use of the word 'existence' is wrong as it cannot be a predicate.

For example:

- Man exists.
- Santa is a man.
- Therefore, Santa exists.

Existence is not a property but the idea of things. Therefore, Russell supports Anselm's claim that God is the greatest thing you can think of, but not that this proves God's existence in reality.

TASKS

1. Anselm felt he had both demonstrated the existence of God, and that it was necessary for God to exist. Explain Anselm's main points in your own words.
2. What role do triangles play in Descartes' version of the ontological argument?
3. Research in more detail Kant's response to Descartes argument. What are his main criticisms?
4. Research in more detail Russell's response to Anselm's argument. What are his main criticisms?
5. *'Gaunilo presents a convincing counter argument to Anselm.'*
To what extent do you agree with this claim. Refer to both arguments in your answer.
6. Outline the various forms of the ontological argument for the existence of God.
7. *'The ontological argument is only in the mind and is therefore a weak argument.'*
Evaluate this claim.