

ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Ontology = ‘Study of Being’

Anselm’s First Version

If, therefore, that than which greater cannot be thought exists in thought alone, then that than which greater cannot be thought turns out to be that than which something greater actually can be thought, but that is obviously impossible. Therefore something than which greater cannot be thought undoubtedly exists both in thought and in reality.

Don’t worry – break it down.

**Does ‘TTWGCBT’ exist in thought alone?
No, since as long as it remains only in thought it cannot be truly itself.
We can always conceive of something greater by adding ‘existence’.
So the essence of TTWGCBT includes existence.
∴ TTWGCBT(≡ God) exists.**

Anselm’s Second Version

In fact, it so undoubtedly exists that it cannot be thought of as not existing. For one can think there exists something that cannot be thought of as not existing, and that would be greater than something which can be thought of as not existing. For if that greater than which cannot be thought can be thought of as not existing, then that greater than which cannot be thought is not that greater than which cannot be thought, which does not make sense. Thus that than which nothing can be thought so undoubtedly exists that it cannot even be thought of as not existing.

Anselm goes further: let’s break this down.

**‘TTWNGCBT’ not only exists, but must exist.
Since necessary existence is greater than contingent existence.
∴ TTWNGCBT(≡ God) necessarily exists.**

Aquinas, 1225 - 1274 built one objection to the ontological argument on epistemological grounds.

Within Aquinas’ empiricism, we cannot reason or infer the existence of God from a studying of the definition of God. We can know God only indirectly, through the *via negativa* or *via analogica*. In other words, our knowledge of God is *de re* not *de dicto*, *a posteriori* not *a priori*. In this, Aquinas assumes the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being – Creation points in some meaningful way to the Creator.

**St Anselm of Canterbury
Benedictine Monk (1033-1109)**

Ontological Arguments (the term is Kant’s) appear in his work: **Proslogion** (Discourse), written 1077-78.

Gaunilo, a monk and contemporary of Anselm, thought the argument could prove that the mythical lost island of Oceanea – surpassing all others in natural riches – must exist.

In reply, ‘TTWGCBT’ must be a singular entity and the logic of Anselm’s argument only works for this entity, not for entities that are relatively perfect (like islands). ‘An-island-greater-than-which-cannot-be-conceived’ is not coherent as a concept. As Plantinga pointed out: islands have no intrinsic maximum; they can always be bettered.

Norman Malcolm (1911-1990) thought this second version immune from the serious criticism that could be levelled at the first.

If God, the greatest conceivable being, does not exist then he cannot come into existence, since this implies limits on the limitless.

If, then, God cannot come into existence, then if he does not exist his existence is impossible – i.e. necessary non-existence.

Thus God’s existence is either impossible or necessary. It can only be impossible if such a concept is self-contradictory or logically absurd. Assuming this is not so, it follows that God necessarily exists.

René Descartes, 1596-1650, is also credited with formulating versions of the ontological argument. *'But nevertheless, when I think more attentively, I find that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than from the essence of a rectilinear triangle can be separated the equality of its three angles to two right angles, or, indeed, if you please, from the idea of a mountain the idea of a valley; so that there would be no less contradiction in conceiving of a God - that is, of a being supremely perfect, to whom existence was wanting, that is to say, to whom there was wanting any perfection - than in conceiving of a mountain which had no valley.'*

In summary:

**I have an idea of supremely perfect being, i.e. a being having all perfections.
Necessary existence is a perfection.
Therefore, a supremely perfect being exists.**

Enter Kant (1724-1804). Kant is credited with the term 'ontological argument' and with what many thought a definitive attack on it (primarily Descartes versions).

He said that you could throw out a thing and its predicate without contradiction. In other words, just because 'God' and 'supreme perfection' go together, you can throw out the package altogether without contradiction.

Kant also said 'existence' is not a predicate. 'Existence is not a perfection, but that in the absence of which there are no perfections.' To say 'X exists' tells us nothing about X (unlike X is green or X is large). If 'exists' is a property X has, then does 'Y does not exist' mean that Y lacks something?

The Argument by Alvin Plantinga (1932-)

First, the definitions:

Maximal excellence - the property of having omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection with respect to a possible world.

Maximal greatness - the property of having maximal excellence in every possible world.

There is a possible world in which there is a being with maximal greatness. Necessarily, a being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every possible world.

Necessarily, a being has maximal excellence in every possible world only if it has omnipotence, omniscience and moral perfection in every possible world.

Maximal excellence is instantiated in every possible world.

Therefore, in the actual world there is a being that is omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect.

Other objections

David Hume in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*:

'Nothing is demonstrable unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction.'

In modern speak, in the concept 'X exists', X can only be contingent – a 'might have been' or 'might not have been'.

Bertrand Russell argues that when we say 'Cows exist' what we are really saying is that the **concept** of 'cow' is instantiated whereas the concept of unicorn is not. In this, Russell follows **Frege** who argues that 'exists' tells us that a particular thing is instantiated or exists rather than being a predicate. To say that something exists is to say that the collection of features indicated by the predicate expression of that thing is realized or instantiated.