

Does the Ontological Argument Make Sense?

The Nature of the Argument:

- The Ontological argument is an *a priori* argument; it looks to establish God's existence by appealing to the concept 'God'.
- In light of the above point, the argument *does not* depend upon experience for its validity.
- If correct, it establishes God's existence *necessarily*, that is, beyond doubt.
- The argument itself is presented in a variety of ways:

The General Form of the Argument:

- P1: (Necessarily) God is perfect
- P2: Something that exists has a greater perfection than something that doesn't.
- P3: If God did not exist he would be less than perfect

- ∴ Necessarily, God exists!

Anselm's Version:

Proslogion 2:

- God is: "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived."
- But "the fool", who *understands* such an idea, nevertheless: "has said in his heart, there is no God."
- Thus: "it is one thing for an object to be in the understanding, another to understand that the object exists."

- However: "that than which nothing greater can be conceived cannot exist in the understanding alone."
- Were this so: "the very being than which nothing greater can be conceived is one than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible."
- Hence: "there is no doubt that there exists a being than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality."

A Brief Translation!

1. God is the greatest conceivable being; a perfect being in every respect.
2. Even the person who says 'there is no God' has an 'idea' of God; he exists in the mind of the one denying his existence.
3. The greatest conceivable being would not be such if he only existed in the imagination & not reality.
4. As we are imagining the greatest conceivable being, then we must be thinking of a being that exists both in the mind *and* in reality.
5. Therefore, to be the greatest conceivable being, God must exist in reality.

Strengths of Anselm's Argument:

- If correct, Anselm establishes both:
 - A) God's *necessary* existence (i.e. his existence cannot be doubted and is dependent upon nothing else other than his essence).
 - B) God's perfection (i.e. if God *does* exist, his maximal greatness in *every* respect is guaranteed).
- Of course, if he isn't, he doesn't!

Weaknesses of Anselm's Argument:

Gaunilo's Criticism:

- **Gaunilo:** Anselm's line of reasoning can be used to argue anything into existence.
- If we imagine an island, perfect in every way, such an island would have to exist (If we follow Anselm), for, were it not to do so, it would be less than perfect!
- Such an argument is referred to as a *reductio ad absurdum* (reduction to absurdity)

The problem of Existence:

- An object's existence 'in reality' is neither necessarily, nor contingently greater/better than its existence 'in the understanding':
- Whilst material, rather than mental existence might be preferable for a £10 note, a fast car or a piece of chocolate cake, the same would not be true of a computer virus, war, an earthquake or a hangover!

Descartes Formulation of the Argument:



- *when I think of it more attentively, it appears that the existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the idea of a mountain from that of a valley, or the equality of its three angles to two right angles, from the essence of a rectilineal triangle; so that it is not less impossible to conceive a God, that is, a being supremely perfect, to whom existence is wanting, or who is devoid of a certain perfection, than to conceive a mountain without a valley. (Meditation VI)*

A Brief Translation!

1. Whatever Descartes perceives 'clearly and distinctly' to be certain, *must* be so.
2. When Descartes examines his (innate) idea of God, he 'clearly and distinctly' perceives it to contain the idea of perfection.
3. God's existence can no more be separated from his 'perfection' than a triangles '3-sidedness' can be separated from its triangularity!
4. Thus God must exist.

Strengths of Descartes' Argument

- As with Anselm's formulation, if correct, Descartes' argument establishes God's existence as being both necessary and perfect.
- Unlike Anselm's formulation, God's existence is established *directly*; it is self-evidently contained within the idea of God/perfection.

Weaknesses of Descartes' Argument:

Kant's Criticism: Existence *is nota* predicate

- Existence cannot be analysed as a *predicate* or *property* of an object.
- The claim: 'God is perfect, omnibenevolent, omnipotent *and* he exists (!)' misrepresents the *logic* of existence.
- Thus, Descartes presupposes the very thing he is trying to prove (God's existence) in order to prove it!

Evaluating the Argument:

- The logic of the ontological argument is flawed. We cannot 'build bridges' from the conceptual to the real.
- Whilst an objects *essence* can be revealed by reason, its *existence* cannot be.
- Existence is an *empirical*, rather than a *logical* feature of the world (it is discoverable by experience alone).
- Few, however, have been swayed by the logic of such an argument!
