Liberty University

Department of Philosophy

doctrine of Existence as Perfection

By

Shaun M. Smith

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**Introduction**

For the ontological argument, finding just a single problem is a daunting task. However, there is at least one that was presented by Norman Malcolm (through the reasoning of Immanuel Kant) that strikes at the heart of the Ontological Argument: Is existence a perfection? In order to understand the logic of the ontological argument one must always ask that question. If God actually exists as “a being of which none greater can be conceived,” does this make existence a sort of perfection or great-making property? This question is, at a fundamental level, important to the Christian theologian. The Anselmian God is often the God Christian theists defend. Thus, this question is at the heart of our concept of God. The scope of this essay is to analyze the doctrine Malcolm challenges, that existence is a perfection. Existence as a great-making property is no easy task to tackle. Ultimately, the solution will be to understand the doctrine either through a Platonist or Cartesian understanding of existence.

As Norman Malcolm states, “The doctrine that existence is a perfection is remarkably queer.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Malcolm is responding to Anselm’s ontological argument for God’s existence. The ontological argument argues that God exists from reason alone, *a priori*, only using logic to “prove” God’s existence.[[2]](#footnote-2) Before tackling Malcolm’s disagreement with the doctrine of existence as a perfection, one must locate exactly how the doctrine arises in the argument.

**The Ontological Argument**

Saint Anselm of Canterbury was the first to present an ontological argument for God’s existence.[[3]](#footnote-3) Succinctly, the argument moves from the premise, using the definition of God, to the conclusion that God necessarily exists. Alvin Plantinga gives the best representation of the argument:

(1) God exists in the understanding but not in reality.  
(2) Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone. (premise)  
(3) God's existence in reality is conceivable. (premise)  
(4) If God did exist in reality, then He would be greater than He is. [From (1) and (2)]  
(5) It is conceivable that there is a being greater than God is. [(3) and (4)]  
(6) It is conceivable that there be a being greater than the being than which nothing greater can be conceived. [(5) by the definition of "God"]  
  
But since (6) is self-contradictory, given that it’s impossible to conceive a greater being than the greatest being of which none greater can be conceived, we get the conclusion:  
  
(7) It is false that God exists in the understanding but not in reality.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The ontological argument moves from our *concept* of God to God’s existence. If God is the greatest being of which none greater is conceived, then it would be greater to exist in reality (and in the understanding) than in the understanding alone. Malcolm of course notices this by pointing out the *ad infinitum* problem if God were to exist only in the understanding. He states, “a greater thing could be conceived: namely, one that exists both in the understanding and in reality.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Though Plantinga has illustrated a formal version of the argument, Malcolm argues that there are actually two different arguments given by Anselm.[[6]](#footnote-6) The first argument appears in the *Proslogion* chapter 2, and then the second follows in chapter 3.

In chapter two of Anselm’s *Proslogion* appears the first version of the ontological argument. As Anselm states, “But surely, when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about, namely, ‘something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought’, he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Here, Anselm defines God as the greatest being conceived and then argues as such:

1. God is the greatest being conceived, for even the Fool knows this to be true.
2. If God is the greatest being conceived, then he could not exist in the understanding alone because it would be greater for God to exist in both the understanding and in reality.
3. Therefore, God actually exists in reality.[[8]](#footnote-8)

As Malcolm notices, Anselm seems see a tautology between what is understood and what is in the understanding.[[9]](#footnote-9) Anselm sheds more light on this notion in chapters 2 and 15 of the *Proslogion*.

In chapter 2, Anselm gives the example of the painter. A painter understands what picture he or she is going to paint, thus the painting is in the painter’s mind. Once completed, the painter now has both the painting in their mind and understands it as actually existing.[[10]](#footnote-10) The distinction Anselm is making here is that certain pieces of understanding are merely concepts we do have, though it does not mean that we know of them; the distinction here is knowing *of* something and knowing *it*.

Another reference that helps clarify what Anselm means by understanding and understood is in *Proslogion* 15. Anselm discusses shortly whether this greatest conceivable being can actually be thought of. He concludes, “You are also something greater than can be thought.”[[11]](#footnote-11) At first glance, this is not a very significant answer to the question. However, there is a lot to unpack in here. First, this means that we can define God as the greatest conceivable being. This allows us to work with the definition to arrive at his existence. Second, this still leaves room for our inability to know of God, as He is. Properly understood, God, if He were to exist, would be the greatest being, and we can conceive of this. On the contrary, this does not enable a finite being to have full knowledge of God’s entire essence. In relation to the Fool, or the unbeliever, there is still an element of understanding when it comes to God. Though there are those who choose not to believe, if God were to exist He would be the greatest conceivable being, and this is understood by all, atheist and theist alike.

Now that there is more clarity on Anselm’s epistemic notions of understanding, this can Segway into the second ontological argument presented in *Proslogion* 3. Anselm states that “if that which none greater can be conceived can be thought not to exist, then that which none greater can be conceived is not the same as that than which none greater can be thought, which is absurd.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Initially, the main point that Anselm is making deals with necessary existence. As Malcolm also notices, Anselm is arguing that God is either logically necessary or logically impossible.[[13]](#footnote-13) Contingency is not applicable to God’s existence. In discussion God’s attributes, this becomes entirely crucial. Now, when we take an attribute of God’s, let’s say omnipotence, the correct language to use is *necessary omnipotence*. In regards to existence as a perfection, now it should be stated as *necessary existence* as a perfection.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Succinctly, Rene Descartes is also a key figure in discussing any sort of ontological argument for God’s existence. Descartes also shares in Anselm’s understanding of perfection. For Descartes, God is one of those basic ideas upon which perfection cannot be removed. To illustrate this concept, Descartes resorts to geometrical concepts. One cannot remove perfection from God just like one could not remove three sides from a triangle, or that the sum value of a triangle’s angles is equivalent to two right triangles.[[15]](#footnote-15) The two are logically contradictory, based on the definition of God and of a triangle (in Euclidean terms). As William Alston describes, “Descartes is assuming a logical parallel between ‘a triangle has angles equal to two right triangles’ and ‘A perfect being exists’.”[[16]](#footnote-16) However, if the essences of each were such that one could not easily remove them without leading to contradiction, then Descartes would suggest that there is a parallel, on the level of essential properties. Therefore, existence would necessarily be a great-making property.

Anselm and Descartes offer forth a very interesting argument that has faced its troubles. Kant opposed the argument on the bases of logical predication, of which he disagreed with the use of “existence” as a predicate. William Rowe, in contemporary times, suggests that the argument as a whole begs the question, assuming God within the premise.[[17]](#footnote-17) This reasoning is equivalent to Bertrand Russell’s reasoning that the use of proper nouns always presupposes the existence of what is being said.[[18]](#footnote-18) However, whether or not existence is a type of perfection or a great-making property, has not undergone a great deal of scrutiny.

**Existence as a Perfection**

The topic of existence as a perfection is an entirely new flavor of discussion. In the 1990s film, *Being John Malkovich*, I think John Cusack’s character question its rigor perfectly (pun intended), “Do you know what a metaphysical can of worms this portal is?”.[[19]](#footnote-19) A very ingenious way of putting the fact that John Cusack’s character, Craig Schwartz, finds a portal that leads him into the mind of the famous actor John Malkovich. In the portal, Craig Schwartz has complete control over Malkovich’s body, though in due time Schwartz gains complete control. Dealing with the metaphysical and ontological concept of existence as a perfection, or a divinely perfection, has a similar feel. This may be due to the immense amount of neglect this question receives. Perhaps, this leads to some form of skepticism. Maybe this is a question that will remain a mystery, similar to how Peter van Inwagen felt about metaphysical freedom.[[20]](#footnote-20) In any case, the only way the doctrine of existence as a perfection will make any sense to the contemporary, analytic mind, philosophers will have to find that portal like Craig Schwartz.

First, let us analyze the analogy Malcolm uses to address this issue: The King’s New Chancellor Analogy. Suppose that a certain King is looking for a new chancellor. The King, hoping to find the greatest chancellor there is to find, calls up two noble councilors, and asks both to draw up descriptions for the most perfect chancellor. The two lists are identical, except councilor A adds “existence” to the list of descriptions and B did not. Logically, according to Malcolm, anyone who satisfies A’s list, necessarily satisfies B’s list, and *vice versa*.[[21]](#footnote-21) Malcolm argues that the reason why A did not add any real predicate to the list is because existence is not a logical predicate, siding here with Kant’s criticism and reasoning for why Anselm’s first argument in *Proslogion* 2 is fallacious. The doctrine of existence as a perfection is simply false, according to Malcolm.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Kant’s objection that existence is not a real predicate can be ruled out as a poor observation of the term “exists.” First, grammatically the term “exists” functions as a predicate. For instance, “the Ottoman Empire no longer exists” or “unicorns and magical mules do not exist.” Kant merely states that “exists” is not a logical predicate. The issue is not whether exists is a real predicate, but whether or not some of these more abstract, transcendent objects exists. Kant’s empiricism illustrates exactly why he objects to the predication of existence.

However, there are good reasons to suspect that Kant’s objection is not relevant to the issue at hand.[[23]](#footnote-23) As Alvin Plantinga has stated, “If this were Anselm’s procedure – if he had simply added existence to a concept that has application contingently if at all – then indeed his argument would be subject to the Kantian criticism. But he didn’t, and it isn’t.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Thus, Kant’s criticism may not be relevant because Anselm was not trying to add existence; instead Anselm believed it logically followed. If this is the reasoning that Malcolm uses against the doctrine of existence as a perfection, then at some level Malcolm’s contention may not be relevant as well. If Anselm is not trying to add anything to the concept of God, then Anselm is not adding existence to the list of perfections, instead existence as a perfection logically follows.

Leibniz attempted to solve this serious riddle by showing that thinking about the supremely perfect being is coherent apart from self-contradictory. For Leibniz, any thinker may posit the very possibility of a supreme and perfect being, for the extent of our knowledge grants us this right.[[25]](#footnote-25) Again elsewhere, Leibniz concludes that God is possible and therefore necessarily exists, because the divine nature only needs the possibility to have its being.[[26]](#footnote-26) However, Leibniz understood to a great degree the importance of proving the doctrine of existence as a perfection. He states that in order for the ontological argument to be successful, “to render it mathematically evident; that is, it is tacitly assumed that this idea of the all-great or all-perfect being is possible, and implies no contradiction.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Leroy Howe has dealt extensively with the concept of existence as a sort of perfection. Howe, borrowing from Frederick Sontag’s definition of perfection[[28]](#footnote-28), shows that Anselm’s two ontological arguments give contrary results. The doctrine then is both feasible and defeasible, depending on which ontological argument (*Proslogion* 1 and 2) is up for scrutiny. Howe comes to two conclusions on this analysis. First, Anselm himself offered no justification or clarification on the doctrine in question.[[29]](#footnote-29) Second, proponents of the Ontological argument must live with the haunting realization that we really cannot know the answer to the riddle.[[30]](#footnote-30) This position is also shared by Charles Crittenden who believes that the property of existence cannot be understood as a perfection due to our inability to find relation amongst other “greater” things.[[31]](#footnote-31)

As Lowe and Crittenden illustrate, Anselm has no clear understanding of the concept of existence being a great-making property. However, is this at all relevant to the argument Anselm is making (as Plantinga points out with Kant’s critique)? If this is relevant, then perhaps Descartes can help clarify whether existence is a great-making property, or a false doctrine that forces the ontological argument to collapse. Descartes appears to be the game changer in this situation. For Descartes, God’s perfections include all that there is to exist. God and perfection are inseparable and this can be fundamentally brought out under Descartes’ epistemological framework. If God exists, and God is a perfect being, does this not apply to all the essential properties of God? To illustrate this, let’s say God A has properties that are perfect and exists (in and outside the understanding), and God B has properties that are perfect and does not exists (only exists in the understanding). The point to see here is this: If God B is true, then the properties of perfection do not apply to existence, because God does not exist outside the understanding. If God A is true, then God is perfect and all of his essential properties are perfect, that would include existence. In Descartes’ understanding, one has the idea of God and perfection cannot be removed from that idea. Also, everything that God contains is perfect, which includes the property of existing. Thus, there is a degree in which God’s necessarily existing plays an important role in the idea that existence is a great-making property.

In modern times, this concept of existence as a great-making property or a perfection may be hard to grasp. An important role that plays into Anselm’s argument, however, is Platonism. Robert Bretcher makes this point clear. The term “’greater’ is therefore to be understood in a platonic manner; not as ‘better’, or ‘more perfect’, but as ‘ontologically greater’, that is to say, ‘more real’.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Under a more platonic understanding, one must resort to the heirachacal view of reality. Thus, Bretcher notices that for Anselm, a being of which none greater can be conceived would be at the highest point of ontology, the ideal form.[[33]](#footnote-33) Once again, by definition, a being of which none greater could be conceived would have the greatest form, and that form includes the property of existence.

A serious objection can be made against the belief that existence is a perfection or a great-making property. William Rowe asks us this: If Satan exists, and existence is a perfection, then in some sense Satan has perfection?[[34]](#footnote-34) This objection conflates moral responsibility with ontological status. If one were to remove all the moral wrongdoing, the wickedness of Satan, then the answer is yes, Satan exists and existence is a perfection. The problem is that Satan, as the story goes, made moral choices that resulted in his downfall. Therefore, this objection does not offer a striking blow to the argument of Anselm and Descartes.

To conclude, the idea that a property like existence is a perfection is not clearly understood directly by the arguments Anselm presents. Howe and Crittenden present a skeptical understanding of the doctrine, but at the same time they do not resort to combat either the Cartesian understanding of ideas or the Platonic understanding of ideas and the forms. With a Cartesian or Platonic understanding of what existence is, one could find a good groundwork in the concept of perfected attributes, like existing.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Whether or not the property of existing is a perfection serves a great deal of importance for the ontological argument for God’s existence. However, to understand Anselm’s use of such a doctrine would require us to put on the metaphysical helmet of Plato and Descartes. If existence is a predicate, a property that can be added after a subject and a copula, then under the Platonist and Cartesian understanding, existence is a great-making property, capable of making one ontological being greater than another. If existence is a great-making property, then the ontological argument presented in chapter 2 of the *Proslogion* is still up for consideration, contrary to the analysis Malcolm has given.

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1. Norman Malcolm, “Anselm’s Ontological Arguments,” in *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, eds. Peter van Inwagen and Dean W. Zimmerman (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 615. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. And yes this is a “proof” for God’s existence, similar to what you would recognize as a mathematical proof. The argument starts from the definition of God: a being of which none greater can be conceived. Anselm argues that this is the concept of God, “for even the fool understands this when he hears it.” From there, you work out logically the conclusion that God exists in reality. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Anselm of Canterbury. *The Major Works*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alvin Plantinga. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 87-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Malcolm, *Anselm’s Ontological Argument*, 614. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 613-620. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Anselm, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Malcolm, *Anselm’s Ontological Argument*, 614. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Anselm, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. at 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., at 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Malcolm, *Anselm’s Ontological Argument*, 616-617. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rene Descartes, “Descartes’ Statement of the Ontological Argument” in *The Ontological Argument*, edited by Alvin Plantinga, (New York: Doubleday, 1965): 31-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. William P. Alston, “The Ontological Argument Revisited,” in *The Ontological Argument*, edited by Alvin Plantinga, (New York: Doubleday, 1965): 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See William Rowe, “Reply to Plantinga,” *Nous* 32, no. 4 (December 1998): 545-552. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Bertrand Russell, “General Propositions and Existence,” in Hick, John, and Arthur C. McGill, eds. *The Many-Faced Argument: Recent Studies On the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God*, edited by John Hick and Arthur C. McGill, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009): 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Charlie Kaufman. *Being John Malkovich*, DVD, Directed by Spike Jonze, (Los Angelas, CA: Garamercy Pictures, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Peter van Inwagen, “The Mystery of Metaphysical Freedom”, in in *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, eds. Peter van Inwagen and Dean W. Zimmerman (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 456. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Malcolm, *Anselm’s Ontological Argument*, 615. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. See also, Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: McMillan, 1929), 505. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Charles Crittenden, “The Argument from Perfection to Existence.” *Religious Studies* 4, no. 1 (October 1968): 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Plantinga, *God Freedom and Evil*, 97-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. G.W. Leibniz, *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, Translated by Alfred Langley. (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1949): 504. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. G.W. Leibniz, *Discourse On Metaphysics and Other Essays*. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991): 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 504. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Frederick Sontag, *Divine Perfection: Possible Ideas of God*. (New York: Harper and Borthers, 1962). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Leroy Thomas Howe, “Existence as a Perfection: A Reconsideration of the Ontological Argument.” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1965): 186-188. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Crittenden, *Perfection to Existence*, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Brecher, Robert. *Anselm’s Argument: The Logic of Divine Existence*. (Brookfield, VT: Gower, 1985): 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. William Rowe, “Friendly Atheism Revisited,” *International Journal for Philosophy of*

    *Religion* 68, no. 1 (June 2010): 7-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)