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The Ontological Argument: Past, Present, and Future

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From the dawn of written history there has never been a more contested topic to discuss other than the existence of God. Even amongst contemporary times, this debate is still ongoing. Amongst theist there exist a good amount of arguments, from cosmological to teleological ones, and onwards to the moral argument for God’s existence. However, those may serve as the strongest arguments to use against your atheist friends and colleagues, but perhaps there is one that is often neglected amongst even the most esteemed theists. Is it possible, after heavy meditation, to realize God’s existence through logic? Within the history of ideas there exists one argument that presents that very concept. Saint Anselm of Canterbury was the first to offer such an argument, which is commonly referred to as the ontological argument for God’s existence. The ontological argument is one that starts with the definition of God and moves to its existence being logically necessary. After this argument appeared, it has been met by fierce objections to show the argument’s invalidity. But, there is no doubt that this argument is still in need of discussion and is perhaps, far from being settled. The purpose of this essay is to illustrate the ontological argument. Next, I will present the objections that have been given to this argument. Lastly, I will reconstruct this argument to clarify any misconception that most people have when dealing with the ontological argument. To conclude, I will discuss the apologetic value in this argument, as well as, making the move from logic to reality.

1. Anselm’s Argument

The first appearance of the Ontological Argument comes from Saint Anselm’s *Proslogion* chapter two. Anselm’s argument is presented in its fullest within these chapters. To begin, there is an important notion worth recognizing in regards to Anselm’s adventure into the nature of God. Anselm does implore this topic as a meditation. He writes, “O Lord, you who give understanding to faith, so far as you know it to be beneficial, give me to understand that you are just as we believe, and that you are what we believe.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Though this hints towards Anselm’s reasons for developing the argument, it by no means removes some of the profound intricacies developed through the argument. Karl Barth attacks the presuppositions Anselm reveals to the reader. As Barth believes, Anselm is working with his “theological program” and only holds to the belief in God as “an article of faith.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Though Barth may be attributing good insights, this does not remove any of the complications within the ontological argument. To clarify, there is no need to deconstruct the literature find intentions, desires, or hidden prayers. If Anselm was performing this as a meditation, there is no need to deny the argument that has come from this meditation.

Anselm first discusses the major and minor premises of the ontological argument in chapter two. First, Anselm defines some of his more platonic concepts of what it means to understand. He uses the example of a painter. When a painter, such as Michelangelo or Da Vinci, begins the process of creating his or her masterpiece, the work of art exists first in the understanding. After painting the picture, the work of art now exists both in the understanding and in reality.[[3]](#footnote-3) A central tenet to Anselm’s argument is that every person, even the “fool”, can conceive an object within the understanding. From this understanding, one moves to reality. Thus, Anselm accepts the concept of moving from the logical realm to the real. Whether or not this is a possible action will be discussed later on.

Second, there is the definition of God. God, according to Anselm, is “that than which none greater can be conceived.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This definition is both simple and concrete. Anselm is not so worried about the specific attributes of God (i.e. omnipotence, omnipresent, morally perfect, etc.), instead, Anselm is displaying a general concept of which neither a theist nor an atheist can deny. From a universal understanding of God, if there exists in reality a God, then that God would be the greatest conceivable being. Perhaps this is to be the major premise of Anselm’s argument.

A third element of the ontological argument deals specifically with what is “greatest”. Within Anselm’s understanding, there is one principle that makes this argument possible (perhaps valid). The “Great-Making Principle” is one that is incorporated into the language to conclude that for any being to exist, and be the greatest being, it would definitely be greater for that being to exist in both the understanding and in reality.[[5]](#footnote-5) At face value, this principle seems to be a valid one. For example, one must only argue that a human would be a better human, if that human actually existed. The principle could be symbolized as such: E (U ∙ R) > E (U).[[6]](#footnote-6) In the case of God, if God were to be the greatest possible being, then God should exist both in the understanding and in reality to satisfy the “great making property”.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Thus, including both the major and minor premises of Anselm’s meditation, the ontological argument can be constructed in a way that incorporates these elements. Alvin Plantinga has given the best representation of this 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.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The formula of this argument, presented by Plantinga, incorporates Anselm’s view on understanding, a standard definition of God, as well as, the “great making principle”.

1. Alterations of the Ontological Argument

Anselm is the ultimate originator of the ontological argument, but throughout the course of history philosophers have been intrigued by the perplexities of the argument. Rene Descartes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and even within the world of modal logic, Alvin Plantinga and Charles Hartshorne have also altered the argument to combat some of the objections raised against it. For the purpose of this essay, it seems more than necessary to at least look at three alternative versions of the ontological argument.

Rene Descartes famously reconstructed his entire belief system on the basis of a few basic beliefs. His account of knowledge may be perplexing and in need of discussion, but one element of his inquiry includes the *idea* of God. As described, Descartes says that “It is certain that I no less find the idea of God, that is to say, the idea of a supremely perfect Being, in me, than that of any figure or number whatever it is…”.[[9]](#footnote-9) Perhaps, what makes Descartes’ ontological argument so fascinating is the illustrations taken from mathematics. For instance, Descartes admits that within him, “I clearly see that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than can its having its three angles equal to two right angles be separated from the essence of a rectilinear triangle…”.[[10]](#footnote-10) Thus, only in Descartes’ version of the ontological argument do we find the illustrative comparison of God’s existence to that of mathematics.[[11]](#footnote-11) Descartes’ argument does not deal with some of the more specific arrangements in Anselm’s. For example, the “great making principle” does not have any applicability to Descartes’ God. He relies entirely on the idea itself. This idea of God, which exists within the mind, is enough to say that God exists. Of course, if ideas were all that we needed then this matter would be as simple as Descartes wishes it to be.

A second alteration by Leibniz offers a peculiar twist to the matter. Leibniz’s account of the ontological argument offers forth a qualitative demonstration for understanding the ontological argument. First, Leibniz answers to a common objection given to the ontological argument; the argument simply assumes God’s existence. Leibniz clarifies that in order for God to be proven through logic or mathematics one must understand that this does not assume God’s existence but posits the possibility of God’s existence. He states, “We have the right to presume the possibility of every being, and especially that of God, until some one proves the contrary.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Leibniz then offers the hypothesis of compatible perfections, namely that any two simple qualities that are perfect can exist together. To illustrate, if God is possible and part of what we know of the possible attributes of God is existence, then these two are compatible perfections.[[13]](#footnote-13) Though Leibniz fails to really account for the move from logic to reality, there are a few important issues that he may have resolved. First, no one assumes God. Instead, only the possibility of God’s existence is assumed, and there is no crime in that. Second, God’s being and existence are compatible traits to be used in a proposition.

Lastly, the final alteration of the ontological argument worth discussing is the modal version of the argument. Like Leibniz, this argument attempts to revitalize its uses in contemporary circles by applying the exhaustion of logical possiblities. The most notable advocates of the modal ontological argument are Alvin Plantinga and Charles Hartshorne. Plantinga states his argument as so:

(1) It is possible that there is a greatest possible being.

(2) Therefore, there is a possible being that in some world W′ or other has a maximum degree of greatness – a degree of greatness that is nowhere exceeded.

(3) A being B has the maximum degree of greatness in a given possible world W only if B exists in every possible world.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Perhaps this version of the ontological argument has conquered some of the objections that have been raised against it, but what exactly is this argument saying? Plantinga distinctly describes this argument as such, “what follows is that if W′ had been actual, B would have existed in every possible world. That is, if W′ had been actual, b’s nonexistence would have been impossible.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Plantinga’s reconstruction of the argument includes tenets of the original Anselmian argument, such as the “great making principle” and the general definition or signified attribute of God, namely that He is the greatest possible being conceived.

1. Objections Against the Ontological Argument

After tracing a part of the ontological argument’s history through time, there appears to be certain problems that are inherently being answered by the philosophers listed above. There have been a few objections to the ontological argument that are worth discussing in further detail. The first deals with using existence as a predicate. Second, William Rowe believes the argument begs the question, already assuming God’s existence. Lastly, there is the application of the logic to any object conceivable.

First Immanuel Kant asks the question of whether existence can be used as a predicate. He writes:

Being is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could1 be added to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations, as existing in themselves… If, now, we take the subject (God) with all its predicates (among which is omnipotence), and say 'God is', or 'There is a God', we attach no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itselfwith all its predicates, and indeed posit it as being an object that stands in relation to my concept.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In essence Kant states that God exists is logically equivalent to saying God is, but “is” does not attribute a predicate to the proposition of God is. This objection is problematic, simply because Kant equivocates “is” with the attribute of “existence”. To say God is existent would be to say that God has the attribute of existing in reality. This clearly does not violate any form of logic, but rather Kant is attempting a play on words.

William Rowe writes a rather peculiar article that attempts to tackle a fundamental mishap with Anselm’s and Plantinga’s Ontological Arguments for God’s existence. The problem Rowe will tries to reveal is an *epistemic* question begging on behalf of Anselm and Plantinga. Rowe finds disdain for Plantinga’s premise “It is possible that God exists in reality”.[[17]](#footnote-17) When one claims that something is possible they must *know* that there is nothing contradictory or impossible in the proposition: “X exists in reality.” Thus, there is a distinction of logical and physical possibilities. Logical possibilities include those of which we can conceive of. A physical possibility is one in which the laws of nature permits. Rowe gives an example to these possibilities. A twenty-five feet tall human being is logically possible, as in there is nothing contradictory about a human growing to be twenty-five feet tall. On the contrary, the laws of nature does not permit a human to grow to be twenty-five feet tall, thus it is a physical impossibility.[[18]](#footnote-18)

With these modes of possibilities in place, Rowe believes that premise 3, “It is possible that God exists in reality”, is question begging. The premise begs the question epistemically, according to Rowe, because the only way to *know* that God’s existence is possible is to know that he exists in reality. In Anselm’s version, the “great-making property” that is attributed to God would not be the possible being if God does not exist. For Plantinga, once we accept the “great-making property” Anselm presents, then God’s existence in actuality must be assumed in order to know the possibility of God’s existence. To summarize this perplexing principle, the only way God is to necessarily exist is to have that “great-making property” of existing in reality; after all, that is what allows the greatest being of which none greater can be conceived to exist necessarily. Plantinga cannot claim the possibility of God being an existing being because that being can either have that great making property and exists, or Anselm’s God does not have that great-making property and is an impossible being.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Rowe posits a great danger to the way philosophers may use modal logic in their inquiries. Systematically, Rowe has rejected Leibniz’s account of positing possible beings. As mentioned above, Leibniz felt that each one of us was entitled to conjure up any possible being that one may conceive of.[[20]](#footnote-20) Where Rowe clearly misses the point is where he absurdly claims that one has to *know* that these conceivable beings exist in reality. All one needs to understand, just as Anselm delineates, is that this possible being is in the understanding, in the world of one’s own conceivability. In Plantinga’s version, possibility is just that, a possibility. The term possibility has a two-fold nature. On the one hand an object or being is possible and on the other hand is possible not to be. In God’s case, there is the possibility which includes God’s existence to be and not to be. Thus, when Plantinga claims that God is possible, Plantinga is acknowledging that God can be or cannot be, never actualized in any stretch of the imagination. There appears to be no acknowledgement of what is real or not real. To state the problem clearer, a possibility is not an actual.

The last objection given to the ontological argument comes from an actual reply given to Saint Anselm. Guanilo, who was a contemporary of Anselm’s, provides an illustrative example that attempts to show how Anselm’s logic can provide the existence for any given thing. Guanilo uses an island, in fact not just any island but the greatest possible island ever conceived. Within this island there are an abundance of trees, waterfalls, perhaps food. Since this island is conceivable, as most would agree to (in fact, I am conceiving this utopian island right now), the existence necessarily follows. Thus, by using similar logic, for anything to be the greatest possible entity it must exist both within the understanding and in reality.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Of course, for Anselm this is merely a misunderstanding of the objects actually being considered. From the traditional definition of God, God is a being of which none greater can be conceived. A proper inference to make from this definition is that such a being would be limitless. However, any conceivable island (or other finite object) that is the greatest possible island can always be expanded. For example, one could always add another palm tree or a greater quantity of riches. In God’s attributes, nothing more could be added. Thus, Anselm seems to regard Guanilo’s island as inconsistent.[[22]](#footnote-22) Again, this is what makes the ontological argument so special, and yet the ultimate brain teaser as well. Arthur McGill notices a rather interesting aspect that may help decipher the problem. Simply, there is something special about the language. The words are not just expressing a reality, but are in reality themselves. Thus, the ontological argument may be the axiom embedded within reality.[[23]](#footnote-23)

1. Returning Back to Anselm

Over the past few hundred years, philosophers may have strayed away from the classical version of this argument, moving on towards the modal version presented by Plantinga. Is there any way to rescue Anselm’s original argument, and give light to the deductive use of natural theology? Fundamentally, there is one principle that needs to be understood before attempting to return to Anselm’s argument: existence.

Leibniz’s account of possibilities tends to be an accurate display of the creative elements of human beings. Thus, when considering the world of ideas (not necessarily in a Platonic sense), there appears to be any possible objects (i.e. unicorns, utopian societies, God). In regards to what it means to exist, it is rather important to consider that these ideas do exist in some respect. This is what I will call the dualistic nature of existence, namely that if an object exists in the mind then it exists in the world of ideas or if it exists in reality, then that object exists in both modes of existence. In order for an object to exist in reality alone, humans must not have discovered such a concept at the specific time period, though it may be possible to discover that object in the future. To summarize and clarify, a thing is said to exist in two aspects. First, an object may exist in the understanding or an object is said to exist in both understanding and reality.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Understanding a dualistic nature of existence, Anselm’s argument can be reconstructed and shown valid:

1. By mere definition, if God were to exist, God would be the greatest being of which none greater can be conceived.
2. If a concept exists in the mind, then it exists in at least one mode of existence (that of the mind)
3. Everyone can conceive of this “God” of which no greater being can be conceived.
4. It necessarily follows that by being the greatest being, it would be greater to exist in both the understanding and in reality.
5. Since God necessarily exists in one mode of reality, it necessarily exists by its definition in the second mode of reality, which is the world outside of ideas.

Structuring Anselm’s argument to include the two natures of existence clarifies any misconception of using existence as a predicate. Instead of saying something exists (i.e. God exists), this argument presents a clear understanding of what is being said, namely that God is in the mind instead of just “God is” (to use Kant’s terminology). Thus, to construct the ontological argument in this manner would remove the problem of predicating existence (if the problem was even there to begin with).

Lastly, the newly constructed argument does not necessarily release itself in modal logic. For example, in the first premise the argument states “if God were to exist”. This leaves room for the exhaustion of possibilities, which would include God’s existence, but not necessarily. By stating the premise in a universal condition, this does not assume the existence of God prior to developing the argument. As a universal conditional statement, if God were to exist then God would be the greatest being. The antecedent does not have to be true in any sense of the imagination, but if that antecedent were true then God would be as such.

1. Concluding Thoughts

To conclude, it would be necessary to discuss the possible apologetic value this argument may or may not have. For any theist, this argument may present itself as the last choice for any apologetic work. However, quite the contrary may be true. The most important choice a person may take with this argument is whether or not they will take the leap from the logic to the real world. For any given person, whether they be a scientist, philosopher, or what have you, can that person go from logic to reality? Surely this is the real problem that stirs in the emotions of any philosopher who takes on the ontological argument.

Within American culture at least, there appears to be an enormous use of this move from logic to reality. Just look at the technological savvy comments that are thrown around from a day to day basis. A general comment that comes to mind is this: “if we put our minds to it, anything is possible.” The obvious question to that is “anything?”. Perhaps this is a sign that all of us must observe. In the past decade, Western Civilization has expanded its use of technology, discovering more and more each year. How was this done if someone did not move from the logical to the real? Clearly, in order for advancements to be made one often starts with the logical world, the world of ideas, then moves to the real. Simply, we call this discovery.

Has Anselm discovered God in the same manner Apple discovered the Ipad? Most certainly, this is exactly what Anselm did. If apologists are willing enough, explaining how one moves from the logic to reality would make a proper grounding for understanding the ontological argument. In turn, there appears to be a valid argument, which successfully moves from the logical to the real world, granting God’s existence.

In the coming years of philosophy, there is no telling who will pick up the ontological argument. Perhaps the argument will fade into the Annals of the history of philosophy. Wherever this argument ends up, what is clear is that the ontological argument for God’s existence is far from settled.

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1. Saint Anselm, “Proslogion” in *The Many-Faced Argument: Recent Studies On the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God*, ed. John Hick and Arthur C. McGill (Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Karl Barth, ed., “A Presupposition of the Proof: The Name of God,” in *The Many-Faced Argument: Recent Studies On the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God*, ed. John Hick and Arthur C. McGill (Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009), 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Anselm, at 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Anselm, at 4-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Robert Brecher, *Anselm's Argument; the Logic of Divine Existence.* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Gower, 1986), Chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is to say, for any given existent, it would be greater to exist both in understanding and in reality then it would be to exist in the understanding alone. The “great making principle” is an important notion to understand when examining Anslem’s argument. There appears to be no objection to this principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 87-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rene Descartes, “Descartes' statement of the ontological argument,” in *The Ontological Argument from St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers;* ed. Alvin Plantinga (New York: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1968), 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Often, within contemporary times, the objection that often is raised deals with Euclidean Geometry. As of the 20th century, most of Euclid’s’ understanding of mathematics has been “disproven”, thus Descartes makes no sense as to how the existence is attributed to God. Whomever raises this objection misses the point. Descartes seems to be distinguishing between two modes of existence. Dealing specifically with the idea of God, this is all that is necessary to discuss existence. It seems for Descartes, all one needs is ideas. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz,” in *The Ontological Argument from St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers;* ed. Alvin Plantinga (New York: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1968), 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 55-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Plantinga at 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Rev. 2nd ed. (Houndmills, Basingstoke.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 505. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rowe, William L. 2009. "Alvin Plantinga on the Ontological Argument."International Journal For Philosophy Of Religion 65, no. 2: 87-92.Philosopher's Index, EBSCOhost (accessed September 22, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Leibniz, at 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Guanilo and Anselm, “Criticism and Reply,” in *The Many-Faced Argument: Recent Studies On the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God*, ed. John Hick and Arthur C. McGill (Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009), 22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Plantinga at 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Arthur C. McGill, “Recent Discussions of Anselm's Argument,” in *The Many-Faced Argument: Recent Studies On the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God*, ed. John Hick and Arthur C. McGill (Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009), 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Baker, Lynne Rudder, and Gareth B Matthews. 2010. "Anselm's Argument Reconsidered." *Review Of Metaphysics* 64, no. 1 (253): 31-54.*Philosopher's Index*, EBSCO*host* (accessed September 20, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)