

# [The very concept or idea of god philosophy essay](https://assignbuster.com/the-very-concept-or-idea-of-god-philosophy-essay/)

Ontological arguments attempt to show that the very concept or idea of God implies his reality; that is, that ones being able to clearly conceive of God somehow implies that God actually exists. The ontological argument is a priori. This means that the argument does not rely on the evidence of the sense, or the world around us, for either its premises or its conclusion, but rather it moves by stages of logical argument to a conclusion which is self-evidently true or logically necessary. The argument is both deductive and analytic. This means that the premises of the argument contain the conclusion it reaches and the argument is structured in such a way as to make the conclusion the only possible one that can be deduced from its premises. Because it is analytic it is true by definition alone.

The ontological argument was first formulated by eleventh century Archbishop of Canterbury, St. Anselm. Anselm’s original version of the argument is developed in his Proslogion in the course of some reflections on “ the fool who hath said in his heart, There is no God.” Anselm reasons that even to deny God’s existence, the fool must understand the idea of God, who must exist as an idea in the understanding of the fool. Anselm suggests that the idea of God is the greatest possible being, “ a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.” Anselm claims that it is greater to exist in reality than merely to exist in the understanding. Since God is by definition the greatest possible being, it is impossible for God to only exist in the mind (the understanding). For if God only existed in the mind and not in reality, the God would not be the greatest possible being. Anselm’s argument is an essential idea of the ontological argument because he was the first scholar to formulate the ontological argument which other philosophers, including modern scholars, use as the basis of their developments to the ontological argument.

Five hundred years after Anselm, the French philosopher Rene Descartes reformulated the ontological proof, in terms of the concept of necessary existence. Descartes realised that doubting all of his knowledge proved his existence: “ I think, therefore I am.” Similar to Anselm, Descartes defined God as an infinitely perfect being superior to all beings in perfection. He argued that because we exist and in our minds, have the concept of a perfect being; and as an imperfect being, we could not have conjured up the concept of a perfect being. The concept of a perfect being must therefore have originated from the perfect being itself and a perfect being must exist in order to be perfect, therefore a perfect being exists. Descartes applied his argument for a perfect being to the existence of God. He argued that God is the idea of a supremely perfect being. A supremely perfect being has all perfections. Existence is a perfection. A supremely perfect being has the perfection of existence. It is impossible to think of God as not existing, therefore, God exists. Descartes maintained existence belonged analytically to God in the same way that three angles are analytically predicated of a triangle, or less convincingly, as a valley is a necessary predicate of a mountain.

Norman Malcolm proposed another form of the ontological argument in support of necessary existence. Malcolm argued; if God exists, his existence is necessary; if God does not exist, his existence is impossible. Either God exists or he does not exist. Therefore God’s existence is either necessary or impossible. God’s existence is possible (not impossible), therefore God’s existence is necessary. Malcolm’s argument is an essential idea of the ontological argument because it is a development of both Anselm’s and Descartes’ arguments and logically proves the necessary existence of God.

Alvin Plantinga formulated his own, contemporary version of the ontological argument. Plantainga suggested that since we are able to imagine any number of alternative worlds in which things may be quite different, for example a world in which John F Kennedy decided not to become a politician and been an estate agent instead. There must be any number of possible worlds, including our own. However, if God’s existence is necessary, he must exist in them all and have all the characteristics of God in them all. This is because, Plantinga argued, God is both maximally great and maximally excellent. He proposed that: there exists a world in which there is a being of maximal greatness, and a being of maximal excellence is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent in all worlds. Plantinga’s argument is an essential idea of the ontological argument because it succeeds in showing that God is possible in all possible worlds.

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Despite the ontological argument seeming to be a strong, convincing argument for proof for the existence of God, it comes under heavy scrutiny from its weaknesses.

Anselm’s argument was refuted in his own lifetime by Gaunilo, who demonstrated that if the logic of the argument were applied to things other than God, it led to invalid conclusions. Gaunilo replaced the word ‘ God’ with ‘ the greatest island’ which led to his argument which had the same form as Anselm’s, with true premises, and yet, which leads to a false conclusion. Gaunilo argued: I can conceive of an island that than which no greater island can be thought. Such an island must possess all perfections. Existence is a perfection, therefore, the island exists. Gaunilo’s argument shows that just because we can think of the greatest possible thing or being in our mind it does not mean that it exists in reality. However this is a weak criticism of the ontological argument and the strengths are more convincing because Gaunilo is applying the argument to a contingent object, where as God is a necessary being according to Anselm. An island may or may not exist. Furthermore, there is no logical point at which we might reasonably say that we have reached intrinsic perfection in an island or other islands, or other contingent things, is surely subjective – I cannot possibly guarantee that my perfect island is the same as yours. Therefore the strengths of the ontological argument are much more convincing than Gaunilo’s criticism because it shows that the argument works when applied to a necessary being, where as Gaunilo applied it to a contingent item, which is not the same thing.

Fundamental to Anselm’s and Descartes’ form of the ontological argument is that existence is a predicate – an attribute or quality that can be possessed or lacked, such as size, shape, colour, temperature, personality, intelligence or traits. These may or may not belong to a being or thing, and their presence or absence is part of our understanding and apprehension of it. However Kant observed that existence is not associated with the definition of something, since it does not add to our understanding of that thing. We must establish the existence of something before we can say what it is like. We cannot ascribe existence a priori to our definition of a perfect being. Kant argues “ it would be self contradictory to posit a triangle and yet reject its three angles, but there is no contradiction in rejecting the triangle together with its three angles.” Kant’s criticism of the ontological argument is very strong and causes the ontological argument to be weak and not convincing because Anselm and Descartes used existence as a predicate in their arguments and consequently they were wrong to do so because existence is not a quality because the idea of God, existence is contained within the definition of God. Kant also added that existence adds nothing to the concept of a thing or being. For example, one hundred pounds in the imagination was not made greater in number or nature by existing in reality. However this argument fails to weaken the ontological argument because arguably one hundred pounds in reality is more useful than one hundred pounds in the mind. In the same way God who only exists in the mind can have no real effect on the lives of believers; where as God who exists in reality can intervene in people’s lives and make a real difference. Despite this, Kant’s argument is still a strong criticism and causes the ontological argument to not be a convincing argument because you can reject the idea of God and easily thin of a being that does not exist.

David Hume also criticised the ontological argument. He believed that the ontological argument makes a false assumption about existence – that necessary existence was a coherent concept. Hume argued that existence could only ever be contingent and that all statements about existence could be denied without contradiction. All things which could be said to exist could also be said not to exist. Hume said: “ However much our concept of an object may contain, we must go outside of it to determine whether or not it exists. We cannot define something into existence – even if it has all the perfections we can imagine.” Hume’s criticism is similar to Kant’s and makes the ontological argument a less convincing argument because it is not possible to move from the necessary of a proposition to the necessity of a God.

In conclusion the ontological argument is a fairly convincing argument despite its various criticisms. The ontological argument cannot be disproved but it also cannot be proved, yet it remains a fairly strong and convincing argument for the existence of God. It is the strongest argument for the theist but it can be argued that it cannot be a strong argument or proof for the existence of God because there is no empirical evidence to prove its claims. However, I believe that it remains a fairly convincing argument because if God is the greatest being, by definition, God must be a necessary being, and in order to be the great being conceivable, God must exist in reality.