

# Anselm's ontological argument essay



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The ontological argument for God's existence is a work of art resulting from philosophical argumentation. An ontological argument for the existence of God is one that attempts the method of a priori proof, which utilizes intuition and reason alone. The term a priori refers to deductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning is the type of reasoning that proceeds from general principles or premises to derive particular information.

The argument works by examining the concept of God, and arguing that it implies the actual existence of God; that is, if we can conceive of God then God exists. However, this type of argument is often criticized as committing a bare assertion fallacy. The bare assertion fallacy is fallacy in formal logic where a premise in an argument is assumed to be true merely because it says that it is true. Anselm was one of the most important Christian thinkers of the eleventh century.

He is most famous in philosophy for having discovered and articulated the so-called "ontological argument". Anselm first gave what has become known as the ontological argument in chapter 2 of his *Proslogion*. Anselm presented two proofs for his argument in his *Proslogion*. In chapter 2 of his *Proslogion* Anselm wrote "we believe that thou art a being which nothing greater can be conceived". This is his definition of God. In other words, God can be described as an absolutely unsurpassable being or a being that cannot conceivably be improved on.

This definition of God should be treated as a stipulation towards Anselm's argument since everyone may not agree on or depict God in the same way. Anselm went on to write "Or is there no such nature, since the fool has said

in his heart, there is no God. This statement questions whether or not there is a being with the properties Anselm's definition assigns to God. To answer this question, Anselm tries to show how God exists in the understanding of someone's mind but not in actuality.

For example, Anselm wrote "this very fool...when he hears of this being... understands what he hears...although he does not understand it to exist". Anselm's assumption here is that if I understand claims about God, then we may say that God exists in my understanding or in my mind. Anselm goes on to justify his assumption by using the analogy of a painter. In short, when a painter first conceives of what it is he wants to accomplish, he has it in his understanding but does not yet understand it to exist.

He doesn't understand it to exist because he has yet to construct his painting. His point in general is that there is a difference between saying that something exists in my mind and saying that I believe that something exists. Anselm goes on to introduce another assumption that could be considered a new version of the argument. He tries to show that God cannot possibly exist in the understanding alone by contrasting existing in the understand with existing in reality. One of the earliest recorded objections to Anselm's argument was raised by one of Anselm's contemporaries, Gaunilo of Marmoutiers. One of the problems that he brings forth is that Anselm's argument could be applied to things other than God.

If the argument were valid, it could be applied to things that are clearly imaginary. Here is where the example of the lost island is introduced. Gaunilo invited his readers to think of the greatest, or most perfect,

conceivable island. As a matter of fact, it is likely that no such island actually exists. However, his argument would then say that we aren't thinking of the greatest conceivable island, because the greatest conceivable island would exist, as well as having all those other desirable properties.

Note that this is merely a direct application of Anselm's own premise that existence is a perfection. Since we can conceive of this greatest or most perfect conceivable island, then it must exist. While this argument seems absurd, Gaunilo claims that it is no more so than Anselm's. Gaunilo asserts that an additional argument is needed to a being like the one Anselm described exists.

Another problem Gaunilo discovers is if one can actually understand what is supposed to be understood for Anselm's argument to work. God is unlike any creature or anything that we have conceived of so Gaunilo questions whether the idea of such a being can be conceived. In Anselm's view Gaunilo, Gaunilo demands a further argument precisely because he has not understood the argument as Anselm has presented it. While St. Thomas Aquinas believed that God's existence is self-evident, he rejected the idea that it can be deduced from claims about the concept of God. Aquinas argued, plausibly enough, that "not everyone who hears this word 'God' understands it to signify something than which nothing greater can be thought, seeing that some have believed God to be a body.

" The idea here is that, since different people have different concepts of God, this argument works, if at all, only to convince those who define the notion of God in the same way. Aquinas had a second problem with the ontological

argument. On Aquinas's view, even if we assume that everyone shares the same concept of God as a being than which none greater can be imagined, "it does not therefore follow that he understands what the word signifies exists actually, but only that it exists mentally." Kant stated the practical necessity for a belief in God in his Critique of Pure Reason.

As an idea of pure reason, "we do not have the slightest ground to assume in an absolute manner... the object of this idea...", but adds that the idea of God cannot be separated from the relation of happiness with morality as the "ideal of the supreme good. The foundation of this connection is an intelligible moral world, and "is necessary from the practical point of view". Later, in the Logic, he argued that the idea of God can only be proved through the moral law and only with practical intent, that is, "the intent so as to act as if there be a God" Immanuel Kant directs his famous objection at premise 3's claim that a being that exists as an idea in the mind and in reality is greater than a being that exists only as an idea in the mind. According to premise 3, existence is what's known as a great-making property or, as the matter is sometimes put, a perfection. Premise 3 entails that existence is a property and instantiating existence makes a thing better, other things being equal, than it would have been otherwise. Kant rejects premise 3 on the ground that, as a purely formal matter, existence does not function as a predicate.

Each of the philosophers I have discussed has made very persuasive arguments. I find Gaunilo argument to be very compelling for various reasons. I feel like he disproves Anselm's arguments by stating that his

argument applies to more than what he is trying to prove exists. If Anselm's argument was proven to be true, anything we imagined might actually exist.

Even though I believe in God, Gaunilo's argument makes plenty of sense to me.