

Ontological argument after anselm philosophy essay



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The ontological argument was first formulated by St. Anselm. In this argument Anselm says God is the most perfect being and therefore he exists.

The very concept of God includes its existence. In other words existence is one of God's essences. It is a logical argument as conclusion follows the premise. The premise is God is the most perfect being and the conclusion is, therefore he exists. The idea or concept of God is only in mind. It also presupposes the Existence as conceptual perfection like truth, goodness. There are many philosophers who supported it and many are rejected it. Aquinas rejected this argument saying is existence of God is self-evident? Though the famous a priori argument for God's existence was revived by various modern authors like Descartes and Leibniz but it is Kant provided the clear critique of its reasoning. He showed "existence" is not an essential perfection. In this assignment I am going to show the some of the philosophers who are for and against the ontological argument.

1. 1 Rejection of the argument by Thomas Aquinas:

Thomas writing two centuries after Anselm rejected the ontological argument. Where he says the concept of God doesn't exists or originates in mind but it is a "self-evident". He formulates his argument as follows.

1. 1. 1 Whether the existence of God is self-evident?

Obj1: he formulates the existence of God is "self-evident". He says those thing are said to be self-evident which are known as soon as the terms are known[1]. Thus as soon as signification of the name of God is understood, it implied that God exist. The very name God implies that "thing than which
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nothing greater can be conceived"[2]. He says that which exists actually and mentally is greater than that exists only mentally"[3]. Hence Aquinas derives that as soon as the name God is understood it exists mentally, and then it follows that exists actually. Therefore the God exists is " self-evident".

Thomas explains this self-evident like this. A thing can be self-evident in two ways, i. e. self-evident in itself and known to us and self-evident in itself and unknown to us. A proposition is self-evident since the predicate is included in the subject. " E. g. " Man is an animal" in this the predicate is contained in the essence of subject. Thus if the essence of subject and predicate is known to all then the proposition is self-evident to all. It is according to the first principles of demonstration". Now take the proposition God exist. This proposition is self-evident in itself, for predicate is as same as the subject, " because God is his own existence as well be hereafter shown". Since the essence of God is unknown to us, the proposition is not self-evident to us, though it needs to be demonstrated by those things which are known to us, not likely by nature, but by their effect"[4].

Thomas Aquinas's " self-evident" proof gives a better understanding of ontological argument. In original ontological argument Anselm takes existence as one of God's essence, But Aquinas rejects this by saying essence of God is unknown to us. Here he differentiates existence from essence. Whereas Anselm in his ontological argument highlights existence is same as essence.

1. 2 Restatement of Ontological argument by Descartes:

Descartes is a “ Father of Rationalism”. For him knowledge is possible only through reason not by sense experience. The criterion for truth is anything that is “ clear and distinct”. Descartes derive the existence of God from his concept of innate ideas. This means we are born in this world with some inborn ideas. One of these ideas is the idea of a most perfect being.

Descartes says we are finite, imperfect being. How can we get the idea of a most perfect being? He explains these ideas are implanted directly by God in our mind. Therefore we are born with certain innate ideas. This shows the existence of a God. Descartes idea was existence cannot be separated from essence[5].

He says I cannot conceive God without existence like mountain without valley. From the fact that I conceive mountain with valley doesn't mean that there is such mountain in the world. Similarly if I conceive a God possessing existence, it doesn't mean that God really exists[6]. Here Descartes shows that I have an idea of something in mind or understanding of God as supreme perfect being, But it doesn't mean that idea of something in my mind should necessarily exists in reality.

The essence of Descartes argument follows here. From the fact that mountain without valley cannot conceivable, doesn't follow that there such mountain or valley exist. But whether mountain or valley exists or not exist, they cannot be separated from each other. So he derives “ I cannot conceive God without existence, it follows that existence is inseparable from him, and hence that He really exists”. Here Descartes also falls into Anselm's mistake by considering existence as perfection[7].

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I disagree with Descartes proof for the existence of God. Most philosophers prove the existence of God using the world or physical reality; But Descartes isolated himself from the world. One cannot prove the existence of God by isolating oneself from the reality. Like Anselm " he recognises that existence is perfection". Existence doesn't add. It is not an attribute; rather existence is " that it is". His starting point of philosophy is " I think, therefore I am"[8]. This starting point itself is an abstraction. He cuts off himself from the reality of this world. Being a rationalist, For Descartes reason is the only right way to know the truth. but only through reason one cannot arrive at the truth. Since reason has its own limit.

1. 3 Leibniz's argument for Ontological proof:

Leibniz repeats St. Anselm's ' ontological argument' saying that the idea of most perfect being is conceivable. He also adds his own thought that God is the only sufficient reason for the existence of contingent beings.

Leibniz blindly follows Descartes idea of " innate ideas". He says " what Descartes has borrowed from Anselm is very beautiful and really very inspired". He appreciates Anselm for discovering a means to prove the existence of God without reason rather ' a priori', i. e. with its own notion without looking at the effects. Leibniz follows Descartes idea that existence is itself perfection, which is a wrong understanding. He justifies that " This perfection which consists in existence, is in this supreme all-great, all-perfect being otherwise it would be contrary to its definition". Here Leibniz follows that most perfect being must exist. He supports Descartes view that " the idea of the all-great or all-perfect being is possible, and it doesn't imply any

contradiction. And by this remark it is proved that, assuming that God is possible, he exists, which is the privilege of divinity alone"[9].

God is a most perfect being. It is true; his existence is not because of perfection. The existence doesn't add, rather perfection could be an essence of God. But we don't know the essence of God. Leibniz also follows the rational principle and concludes the existence of God with the idea of a most perfect being in the mind.

1. 4 Critique of Ontological argument by Kant:

Kant was the one who gave the extensive criticism of the ontological argument, which arriving at the conclusion that 'existence is not a predicate'. It was Descartes who had treated existence as a "perfection" and therefore as a "predicate" or "property" of God[10].

For Kant there are two types of knowledge. They are a priori and a posteriori. The former is the knowledge that you get before experience and latter is the knowledge that you get after experience.

Kant differentiates the unconditioned necessity and the absolute necessity. The absolute necessity of the judgement is only a "conditioned necessity of a thing or of the predicate in the judgement. E. g. a triangle has three angles. In this proposition the three angles are not absolutely necessary but under the condition that there is a triangle. Three angles will necessarily found in it. So when we form a priori judgement/concept of a thing we include existence in such manner that it should match the meaning of a thing. We presupposed that existence necessarily belong to the object, our conclusion always posits as if the thing is existing[11].

In an identical proposition if I reject retaining the subject the conclusion would be contradiction. Suppose if I reject both subject as well as object, there will not be any contradiction results. The E. g. he gives " To posit triangle, and yet to reject its three angles, is self-contradictory; but there is no contradiction in rejecting the triangle together with its three angles. The same truth holds for the concept of an absolute necessary being. If we reject the existence of a being, we reject the thing itself with all its properties. Then there can be no contradiction could arise. " God is omnipotence" is a necessary judgement. The omnipotence of God cannot be rejected, if we assert an infinite being. Since these two concepts are identical. Suppose if I say " God doesn't exist" then it follows that I reject all the internal properties of God together with the subject[12].

He answers as follows. " There is a contradiction in introducing the concept of existence. No matter under what title it may be introduced- into the concept of a thing which we profess to be thinking solely in reference to its possibility"[13]. If this would be allowed as legitimate, Kant says " the assertion is mere tautology", which means same thing but saying in a different way. We must ask " Is the proposition that this or that thing exists, an analytic or a synthetic proposition?"[14]

Being is not a real predicate. I. e. it is not a concept of something which could be added to the thing; rather it just posits the thing, as existing in them. The proposition " God is omnipotent," contains two concepts, each has its object- God and omnipotent. The word " is" just posits the predicate in its relations to the subject. Suppose if I take God as subject with all its

predicates and say " God is" here we didn't attach any new predicate, but <https://assignbuster.com/ontological-argument-after-anselm-philosophy-essay/>

only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates including the “omnipotent” and also posit it as being an object that matches with my concept of being in mind[15]. Kant explains “ My financial position is, however, affected very differently by a hundred real thalers than it is by the mere concept of them. So for the object, as it actually exists, is not analytically contained in my concept, but is added to my concept synthetically”[16].

So Kant’s answer for the ontological argument is if we want to ascribe the existence to a concept we must go outside it. In the case of objects which are experienced by our senses have their connection with one of our perceptions according to the empirical laws. But those objects outside the sense experience, like objects in pure thought, there is no way to know their existence. Since it would have to be known in a priori knowledge[17]. “ Our consciousness of all existence (immediately through perception or mediately which connect something with the perception) belongs exclusively to the unity of experience”[18]. Anything existence outside these field, wouldn’t declare impossible, is of the nature of assumption which cannot be justify. The concept of Supreme Being is a very useful idea. But just because it is a mere idea, by itself alone, it is incapable of expanding our knowledge in regard to what exist[19]. He says “ since the criterion of the possibility of synthetic knowledge is never to be looked for save an experience, to which the object of an idea cannot belong, the connection of all real properties in a thing is a synthesis, the possibility of which we are unable to determine a priori”[20]. Kant says that Leibniz succeeded on achieving, what is known as a priori possibility of this sublime ideal being.

Kant in his book "critique of pure reason" explains how pure reason cannot prove the existence of God. Pure reason cannot prove the existence of God because God's existence cannot be experienced by any of our senses. Reason can only think about things that we have experienced through our senses. So whatever data that sense receives through various experiences sends it to understanding where thinking/reasoning process. So for Kant knowledge is a combination of both sense experience and reason, where he tries to reconcile between rationalism and empiricism[21]. According to Anselm idea of perfect being is only in mind there is no sense experience, which is according to Kant is an a priori. Here Kant is not proving the existence of God but showing the impossibility of ontological argument to prove the existence of God. Kant doesn't prove the existence of God. In his book "critique of practical reason" he shows how practical reason can postulate the existence of God.

1.5 Contemporary discussion: Norman Malcolm

Malcolm is a contemporary philosopher. He has produced one of the clearest and most striking defences of St. Anselm. In his argument he distinguishes two lines of thought in St. Anselm's Proslogion. In his first line of thought he rejects as inconclusive, agreeing with Kant, but the second thought which he shows not merely the existence, but the necessary existence of God is correct[22].

Malcolm says in Anselm's "Proslogion and Responsio editoris" you will find two different pieces of reasoning which Anselm did not distinguish. From psalm, when fool in his heart says there is no God when he hears the word "God", Anselm says, "something a greater than which cannot be conceived," <https://assignbuster.com/ontological-argument-after-anselm-philosophy-essay/>

understands what he says. This understanding is in mind though the fool doesn't understand the very thing exists in reality. Here Malcolm raises two questions in order to clarify what Anselm means[23]. They are "(a) existence in reality by itself is greater than existence in the understanding, or that (b)existence in reality and in the understanding together are greater than existence in the understanding alone"[24]. Anselm holds, " something exists in reality and understanding is greater than it exists only in the understanding". This called the doctrine that " existence is perfection", where Descartes maintained in his book " Meditation V", although he doesn't argue in the same as Anselm does in " Proslogion". In Anselm's first Ontological argument Malcolm says he merely believe in Kant's observation that notion " existence" or " being" is a " real predicate". Where Kant says you cannot add a least predicate to a thing, when you declare the thing " is". If we do this, there would be different thing than what we had in mind and we cannot say the exact object of my mind exists[25].

So Malcolm derives that " Anselm's ontological proof of Proslogion 2 is fallacious because it rests on the false doctrine that existence is perfection"[26]. The same thing I have pointed out in my introduction.

In further discussion I want show how Malcolm proves a part of Kant criticism of the ontological argument is wrong. When Kant says if I reject subject there can be no contradiction results. E. g. when I say " there is no God" I am rejecting the subject along with all its predicates. But Malcolm says when you understood the word " God" correctly, there is no way one can reject or say " there is no God". Here Kant wants to show that subject can be rejected, even in the case of " God", which is wrong and it is pointed out by Malcolm.

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It is necessarily false statement. " Anselm demonstration proves that the proposition " God exist" has the same priority as " God is omnipotent"[27].

Here the Anselm's argument falls because omnipotent is the one of the attribute of God and you cannot consider since God is powerful therefore he exists.

Many modern philosophers agree with Kant regarding existence is not a property. " Although considering existence as a property with regard to the being that have the contingent existence means whose existence is not necessary, is wrong, but it doesn't seem to be wrong considering necessary existence as a property of God" [28].

I donot agree here because in any case one cannot take existence as a property that may be in the case of limited beings or in the case of unlimited being i. e. God. God's existence would be necessary but it doesn't mean that it is the property of God.

When Anselm says " God necessarily exists" here he implies that " God is an absolutely unlimited being". For this Kant says " I think a being as the supreme reality, without any defect. The question is whether it exists or not. Malcolm explains with the example that " there exists an infinite number of stars"[29] when you say this in some sense you assert the existence of something? So in the same why can't say the proposition " God necessarily exists" assert the existence of a thing, in some sense? The logical necessity " reflects the use of words" implies that nothing has a necessary property; moreover the existence cannot be a necessary property of anything. So all the propositions including " God exists" must be contingent, but the concept <https://assignbuster.com/ontological-argument-after-anselm-philosophy-essay/>

of God understood in such a way that the existence of God is a necessary truth[30]. Malcolm also points out the misunderstanding of some of the philosophers in considering the proposition “ God is a necessary being” is equivalent to the conditional statement “ if God exists then he necessarily exists.” He says this implication was made in order to show that the “ subject can be rejected”. Malcolm puts in these words “ God necessarily exists” according to Kant and other philosophers, who says this conditional necessity; is an absolute necessary and it implies that it is possible that God doesn't exist. But is it not a self-contradictory?[31]

“ The conclusion of this analysis would be there is a lack of symmetry”. The proposition “ the triangle has three angles” and “ God has necessary existence”. The former can made into conditional like “ if a triangle exists, then it has three angles” but for the latter we cannot put the conditional assertion because it creates a contradiction[32].

This conclusion of Malcolm would shows that “ God's existence is necessary” which is wrongly understood by many philosophers including Kant, where they put the conditional statement and also you cannot compare God's existence with the finite or contingent beings.

1. 6 Conclusion:

I cannot arrive at the authentic conclusion saying whether Ontological argument is a correct or incorrect argument to prove the existence of God. My limitation in this assignment is studies or reading only on few philosophers on ontological argument after Anselm. But there are many philosophers who worked on ontological argument analysing from different

perspectives and drawing their conclusion on strength and weakness of this argument. In the beginning I disagreed with Anselm's argument saying existence is one of God's essences. Which is a wrong observation made by Anselm. You cannot consider existence as attributes. Existence is that it is, it doesn't add. Only essence adds.

But I agree with Malcolm's observation saying that " God's existence is necessary". Since the very name " God" signifies that he shouldn't come into existence by chance, but his existence should be a necessary existence.