

# Anselm's ontological argument



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In this essay I shall describe Anselm's ontological argument and look at how it may prove God's existence. I will then go on to look at criticisms of the argument from both Gaunilo and Kant to see if they can show that the argument does not work and if not, why not.

The core of Anselm's ontological argument uses a *reductio ad absurdum* structure to attempt to prove the existence of God. He does this by showing that if the negation of the conclusion is followed then this leads to absurdity (a false or nonsensical conclusion). Anselm's argument is as follows: 'If therefore that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the understanding alone [and not in reality], then this thing than which nothing greater can be conceived is something than that which a greater can be conceived. And this is clearly impossible. Therefore, there can be no doubt at all that something than which a greater cannot be conceived exists in both the understanding and in reality.' This quote is somewhat confusing due to the language used so a simplified version may be of some use. The argument can be seen as such (1) God is something which nothing can be greater than; God is the being of maximum greatness. (2) It is completely possible that God can exist within reality; God, no matter whether he actually exists within reality, can exist within some circumstances, therefore God may possibly have existed within our world. (3) Now if something exists entirely and only within the constraints of the mind and does not exist in reality but is still possible then it is plausible that that something which exists only within the mind may have been greater. (4) Now imagine that God exists only within the mind and does not exist in our reality (this can be seen to be God not actually existing at all), this allows for the idea that there

is a possible entity which is greater than God. (5) So it can be a possibility that there is a being or entity which is greater than God! (6) Because God is the greatest and there is nothing which can be greater than God (as stated in point 1) then this argument has shown that there is something which can be greater than that which nothing can be greater than! Because statement 6 makes no sense due to it being self contradictory God must exist not just in the mind but also at the same time in reality. This argument has been given in many different forms over time and I will cite one here to show that the interpretation given above is not too far removed from other interpretations. The following interpretation is given by Plantinga:

God exists in the understanding but not in reality. (Assumption for reductio)

Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone.

(Premise)

3.

A being having all of God's properties plus existence in reality can be conceived. (Premise)

4.

A being having all of God's properties plus existence in reality is greater than God. (From (1) and (2).)

5.

A being greater than God can be conceived. (From (3) and (4).)

6.

It is false that a being greater than God can be conceived. (From definition of " God".)

7.

Hence, it is false that God exists in the understanding but not in reality.

(From (1), (5), (6).)

8.

God exists in the understanding. (Premise, to which even the Fool agrees.)

9.

Hence God exists in reality. (From (7), (8).)

This interpretation basically follows the same structure as mine and uses the reductio ad absurdum principle to prove God's existence. Now we have seen how the argument works we must look at some criticisms of Anselm's approach.

One of the most successful and effective criticisms is given by Gaunilo. He attacked Anselm's argument by stating that his reductio ad absurdum could be applied to many things and not just god. For this reason he believed that Anselm's argument was not a valid or acceptable way to justify Gods existence. Gaunilo used the example of ' the greatest possible island (originally conceivable but we shall use possible for cohesions sake). He went on to apply Anselm's argument to ' the greatest possible island' to prove the

existence of this fictional island using the same style of reasoning which Anselm used to prove the existence of God. Now if somebody told me that there was an island greater than all other islands ever I would have absolutely no problem understanding the words which they used or the concept they were attempting to divulge. But if they then went on to state that because I can imagine the island in my mind then the island must be possible then I would have serious doubts about this concept (and their sanity for that matter). What follows will be Gaunilo's criticism placed into the format of Anselm's reductio ad absurdum argument

: (1) 'Best island' is an island that nothing can be greater than; 'Best island' is the island of maximum greatness. (2) It is completely possible that 'Best island' can exist within reality; 'Best island', no matter whether it actually exists within reality, can exist within some circumstances, therefore 'Best island' may possibly have existed within our world. (3) Now if something exists entirely and only within the constraints of the mind and does not exist in reality but is still possible then it is plausible that that something which exists only within the mind may have been greater. (4) Now imagine that 'Best island' exists only within the mind and does not exist in our reality (this can be seen to be 'Best island' not actually existing at all), this allows for the idea that there is a possible island which is greater than 'Best island'. (5) So it can be a possibility that there is a land or island which is greater than 'Best Island'! (6) Because 'Best island' is the greatest and there is nothing which can be greater than 'Best Island' (as stated in point 1) then this argument shows that there is a possible island which is greater than the island that no island can be greater than. Because statement 6 is self

contradictory then 'Best Island' must exist not just in the mind but in reality at the same time. This argument seems to show that Anselm's argument to prove God can be used to prove a lot of seemingly ridiculous ideas, for example 'greatest possible bouncy castle' or 'greatest possible goat'.

On first impressions it would seem as though this argument goes a long way to disproving Anselm's argument for God but there is a problem with this. Gaunilo's argument doesn't actually tell us what is wrong with Anselm's argument; although it shows that seemingly ridiculous conclusions can be proved to be true it does not specify what is exactly wrong or invalid about Anselm's argument. It does not state that any of the premises are wrong and neither does it show the conclusion to be invalid. In fact if Anselm's argument is looked at in terms of logic then there is nothing wrong with it at all. Although this is the case, Gaunilo's criticism is still a fairly weighty one due its ability to prove absurd conclusions.

As with every objection there is always a response so now let's look at some responses to Gaunilo's weighty criticism. One of these responses focuses on the idea of 'the greatest possible island' (or best island). It states that the 'greatest possible island' can actually not exist. My conception of the greatest possible island almost certainly differs from your conception of the greatest possible island. For example I may prefer there to be a lot of animals on the island, dangerous and non dangerous and a lot of trees. Whereas you may prefer to only have non dangerous animals and mostly open areas on the island. This shows us that although subjectively there is the possibility of the 'greatest possible island' on a large objective scale there can be no such thing. In other words there is nothing within the definition of an island that

allows for maximum greatness within a certain island. The Oxford English Dictionary defines an island as 'a piece of land surrounded by water'. Clearly there is nothing there which could allow for one island to be greater than all others. It mentions nothing of the depth of water surrounding the island, whether or not there are inhabitants of the island, the size of the island etc. This is not the same for God though. Anselm describes God as maximum perfection of which nothing can be greater. The idea of God cannot be pulled away from the description of God. God is that which nothing can be greater than. This differs from the 'greatest possible island' as the idea of perfection is a separate concept which has been added to the idea of an island. So it seems that although Gaunilo's objection on first inspection is a good one it misses the point that maximum perfection cannot be separated from the concept of God whereas maximum perfection can be separated from the concept of an island.

The final objection that I will look at comes from Kant, the very man who coined the phrase 'ontological' for Anselm's argument. Kant's argument works by rejecting premise (3) (if something exists entirely and only within the constraints of the mind and does not exist in reality but is still possible then it is plausible that that something which exists only within the mind may have been greater). Kant states that the Anselm's argument is based on the idea that a God which exists is greater than a God which does not. Kant believes this to be false and confusing. In this objection Kant states that existence is not a property which can be possessed, or not possessed by an object. He goes on to say that existence, if it is not a property, is a concept which refers or corresponds to something within our world (universe). In

other words if something exists then there will be an example of the thing that exists in our world. A way to illustrate this is by giving the example of a ball. This ball is blue, round, fairly heavy and has the diameter of 50cm. Now if I say that this ball exists it does not add any properties to this ball, equally if I say that it doesn't exist it adds no properties to the ball. When I say that it exists I am merely saying that there is an example of this ball within our world. When one applies this to the argument we can see why Kant's objection is so well accepted amongst those who reject the ontological argument. If existence is not a property then a God which exists and a God which does not exist are absolutely identical. Both are omnipotent, omnipresent and so on. If they are both identical then Anselm cannot claim that a God which exists is greater than a God which does not exist. If this is the case then the ontological argument fails as premise three is false!

One response to Kant's objection is that existence adds something to our conception of a subject. If I read about superman believing that he existed I would be very impressed with his powers and what he has done etc. If then I discover that superman does not exist I may be disappointed and my conception of him may change. This then allows for existence to alter my conception of a subject thus allowing for a God that exists to be different, slightly, to a God which does not exist. This response seems somewhat weak though and I believe that Kant's objection still stands.

To conclude I have found that, through Kant's property based objection, Anselm's ontological argument fails to provide a decent way of proving Gods existence. Because Existence cannot be seen to be a property then the ontological argument fails. Gaunilo also provides some criticism of Anselm <https://assignbuster.com/anselms-ontological-argument/>



through showing that the ontological argument can be used to prove all kinds of ridiculous conclusions (if one accepts that the idea of maximum perfection can be separated from the concept of God). So because the ontological argument fails to defend itself adequately against criticism I believe that it fails as a way to prove Gods existence.