

St Anselm's ontological argument¹

Ontological arguments claim that we can deduce the existence of God from the concept of God. Just from thinking about what God is, we can conclude that God must exist. Because it doesn't depend on experience in any way, the ontological argument is a priori.

Ontological arguments have held a fascination for philosophers, and almost every major historical philosopher discussed them. In this handout, we discuss St Anselm's version.

ST ANSELM'S ARGUMENT

The idea of God as the most perfect possible being has a long history. And perfection has also been connected to reality: what is perfect is more real than what is not. Anselm's argument makes use of both these ideas.

In the *Proslogium*, Anselm starts from the concept of God as a being 'greater than which cannot be conceived'. Why define God like this? If we could think of something that was greater than the being we call God, then surely this greater thing would in fact be God. But this is nonsense - God being greater than God. The first being isn't God at all. We cannot conceive of anything being greater than God - if we think we can, we're not thinking of God.

Anselm then argues that if we think of two beings, one that exists and one that doesn't, the one that actually exists is greater - being real is greater than being fictional! So if God didn't exist, we could think of a greater being than God. But we've said that's impossible; so God exists.

- P1. By definition, God is a being greater than which cannot be conceived.
- P2. (We can coherently conceive of such a being, i.e. the concept is coherent.)
- P3. It is greater to exist in reality than to exist only in the mind.
- C1. Therefore, God must exist.

Anselm goes on to explain (P3) further. Conceive of two almost identical beings, *X* and *Y*. However, *X* is a being which we can conceive not to exist; *X*'s not existing is conceivable. By contrast, *Y*'s not existing is inconceivable. We can conceive of such a being, a being who *must* exist. This idea of *necessary* existence is coherent. *Y* is a greater being than *X*, because a being that must exist is greater than one who may or may not exist. Therefore, the greatest conceivable being is a being who, we conceive, must exist. It is inconceivable that the greatest conceivable being does not exist.

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 57-62

Of course, it can *seem* like we can think 'God does not exist'. Anselm notes that we can have this thought, we can think this string of words. But, he argues, in having this thought, we fail to understand the concept of God fully. We fail to understand that the greatest conceivable being is one that must exist. Once we fully understand the concept, we can no longer affirm the thought that God does not exist, because we recognise that it is incoherent.

Compare: you can have the thought 'there are male vixens', but once you understand the concept VIXEN as 'female fox' and understand that what is male is not female, then you recognise that your thought 'there are male vixens' is incoherent. Or perhaps, as another analogy, you can believe that '256 x 3645 = 933,140'. But once you do the calculation again carefully, you'll discover that this is a mistake. $256 \times 3645 = 933,120$, and there is no way that $933,140 = 933,120$. If you understand the concepts of each number and multiplication correctly, and you are able to think clearly with these concepts, you'll recognise that 256×3645 must be 933,120. There is no coherent alternative.

GAUNILO'S 'PERFECT ISLAND' OBJECTION

Anselm received an immediate reply from a monk named Gaunilo. The essence of his most famous objection is that the conclusion doesn't follow from the premises. How great *is* the greatest conceivable being? Well, if it doesn't exist, it is not great at all - not as great as any real object! We can *conceive* how great this being *would be if it existed*, but that doesn't show that it *is* as great as all that and so must exist.

Gaunilo argues that Anselm's inference must be flawed, because you could prove anything which is 'more excellent' must exist by this argument. I can conceive of an island that is greater than any other island. And so such an island must exist, because it would be less great if it didn't. This is ridiculous, so the ontological argument must be flawed.

(Gaunilo slips from talking about the *greatest* conceivable being to talking about conceiving of a being that is *greater* than all other beings. So he talks of an island that is greater than other islands. But this doesn't work. It is possible to conceive of the being which, as it happens, is greater than all other beings as not existing. So let's correct Gaunilo here, and talk of 'an island greater than which is inconceivable'.)

Suppose we grant that, unlike the island, the non-existence of God is inconceivable. This still doesn't show that God actually exists. First, we need to establish that God does exist. And then from understanding his nature, we can infer that he must exist.

ANSELM'S REPLY

In his *Apologetic*, Anselm replies to Gaunilo that the ontological argument works *only* for God, and so this is not a counterexample. Why? Anselm reasons that there

is something incoherent in thinking 'the greatest conceivable being doesn't exist'. By contrast, the thought 'the greatest conceivable island doesn't exist' is coherent. When we have this thought, we are still thinking of an island. There is nothing in the concept of such an island that makes it *essentially* or *necessarily* the greatest conceivable island. Compare: an island *must* be a body of land surrounded by water. An island attached to land is inconceivable. But islands aren't essentially great or not. Instead, the thought of an island that is essentially the greatest conceivable island is itself somewhat incoherent. For example, what features would make it the greatest conceivable island?

By contrast, argues Anselm, God *must* be the greatest conceivable being - God *wouldn't be God* if there was some being even greater than God. So being the greatest conceivable being is an essential property of God. But then because it is greater to exist in reality than merely in the mind, if we think of God as not existing in reality, we aren't thinking of God at all. So to be the greatest conceivable being, God *must* exist.

However, even if Anselm is right about the island, it isn't clear that he has answered the essence of Gaunilo's objection. Gaunilo's point is that although we conceive of God *as* the greatest conceivable being, this doesn't show that God *is* the greatest conceivable being, because if God doesn't exist, God isn't any being at all. And if God isn't a being, then God isn't the greatest conceivable being. We can only say that *if* God exists or were to exist, then God is or would be the greatest conceivable being. So before we can say that God is the greatest conceivable being, we must first demonstrate that God exists.

If this objection is right, Anselm's ontological argument fails.