

Plantinga'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.

In *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Alvin Plantinga presents an ontological argument using the concept of a 'possible world'. Before reading this handout, it is worth becoming familiar with an earlier form of the ontological argument from the handout 'Anselm's ontological argument'.

POSSIBLE WORLDS

A 'possible world' is a way of talking about how things could have been. Propositions describe 'states of affairs'. Propositions can be true or false. A proposition that is true describes the actual world, the way things are, a true state of affairs. A proposition that is false describes the way things are not, a false state of affairs. However, false propositions can be necessarily false or just contingently false. A proposition that is necessarily false cannot be true - it is impossible for it to be true. A proposition that is only contingently false describes a state of affairs that is possible, but false, given how the world actually is. For example, 'I was born in Kenya' is false, but could have been true. A contingently false proposition describes a way things could have been. We can say that in some other 'possible world', this proposition is true, the state of affairs it describes is part of the way that world is. In some other possible world, I was born in Kenya.

We can also talk about the actual world, the way things are, as a possible world. Everything that occurs in the world is possible - so this is a possible world. But it is a very special possible world, because it is actual. We can also say that 'some proposition p is true in some possible world W' = 'p would be true if W were the actual world'.

Possible worlds are distinct from one another depending on what we are supposing to be true in that world. So the possible world in which I was born in Kenya is different from the possible world in which I was born in Argentina which is different from the possible world in which I don't exist at all. In different possible worlds, different things exist and the things that exist can have different properties from the properties they have in the actual world.

A proposition that is necessarily false, we said, is impossible. We can say that it is false in every possible world. Similarly, a proposition that is necessarily true is true

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2014) *Philosophy for AS* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 193-8

in every possible world. Importantly, what is necessarily true and necessarily false doesn't change from one possible world to another. The proposition ' $2 + 2 = 5$ ' is false in every possible world, and there is no world in which it is possible. So 'it is possible that $2 + 2 = 5$ ' is also false in every world. Likewise, ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' is necessarily true. It is not only true in every possible world, it is necessarily true in every possible world. 'It is impossible that $2 + 2 \neq 4$ ' is true in every possible world.

PLANTINGA'S ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

We can use talk of possible worlds to interpret key ideas in the ontological argument:

1. 'It is possible that God exists' = 'There is some possible world in which God exists'.
2. 'It is necessarily true that God exists' = 'God exists in all possible worlds'.

Now, we noted that there are possible worlds in which some being, x , exists and ones in which it doesn't, and in different worlds, x has different properties. So

3. Anselm's claim that 'It is greater to exist in reality than to exist only in the mind' = 'If x exists in some possible world W_1 but doesn't exist in another possible world W_2 ', then x 's greatness in W_1 exceeds x 's greatness in W_2 .
4. Anselm's claim that 'God is a being greater than which cannot be conceived' = 'God is the greatest possible being' = 'There is a possible world in which a being (God) exists which has the maximum possible degree of greatness - no other being, in any possible world, has more greatness'.

Plantinga uses this framework to understand and criticise previous versions of the ontological argument. We will focus just on the new version that he argues is successful.

We first need to understand (4). It says that there is some possible world in which God exists and is the greatest possible being. Now, we said that a being can have different properties in different possible worlds. So perhaps God is the greatest possible being in one possible world, but not in another possible world. But that's not right - it isn't contingent that God is the greatest possible being. For God to be God at all, then God is the greatest possible being. So in any possible world in which God exists at all, God is the greatest possible being. It is necessarily true that if God exists, God is the greatest possible being.

Let's call a being that has the properties of omniscience, omnipotence, supreme goodness, etc., in one possible world 'maximally excellent'. Now, a being that has maximal excellence in every possible world is greater than a being that is maximally excellent in one possible world. On this view, greatness depends not just on the properties a being has in one possible world, but what properties it has in other possible worlds as well. A maximally great being will be a being that is maximally excellent in every possible world.

Our accounts of maximal excellence and maximal greatness are definitions, so they are necessarily true. So we get these premises:

- P1. Necessarily, a being has maximal excellence in a given possible world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, supreme goodness, etc., in that possible world.
- P2. Necessarily, a being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every possible world.

Now we add

- P3. A maximally great being is possible, i.e. there is a possible world in which there is a being that has maximal greatness.

This is enough to conclude

- C1. Therefore, a maximally great being exists (in the actual world).

This is Plantinga's argument in its concise form. But it is worth going more slowly to make the inference clearer. If we put (P2) and (P3) together, we get the claim that

- C2. Therefore, there is a possible world in which a being exists such that it has maximal excellence in every possible world.

Now, a being can't have maximal excellence unless it exists. So if it has maximal excellence in every possible world, it must exist in every possible world.

- C3. Therefore, there is a possible world in which a being exists such that it exists and has maximal excellence in every possible world.

We said above that if 'x exists' is true in every possible world, then 'x exists' is necessarily true. In other words, it is impossible that x doesn't exist. And what is necessarily true doesn't change from one possible world to another. (C3) says that it is possible that it is necessarily true that a maximally great being exists. But that means it is necessarily true that a maximally great being exists. From (P3), (C2) and (C3), we get

- C4. Therefore, a maximally great being exists in every possible world.
- C1. (Again) Therefore, a maximally great being exists (in the actual world).
- C5. By definition, God is a maximally great being.
- C6. Therefore, God exists.

DISCUSSION

For the argument to work, (P3) must be true. Plantinga accepts that he hasn't argued that a maximally great being is possible, it is a premise. But he claims that there is no reason to reject the claim. God's existence has not been proven, until we prove this premise is true; but, claims Plantinga, we have shown that believing in God's existence is reasonable.

However, because Plantinga's definition of maximal greatness is new, his concept of a being that is maximally great faces new objections. When previously thinking about the coherence of the concept of God, we were - in Plantinga's terms - thinking about whether a maximally excellent being, a being with omnipotence, omniscience, supreme goodness, etc., could exist. Plantinga requires not only that such a maximally excellent being could exist, but also that it is possible that such a being exists in every possible world.

So, first, we may accuse Plantinga of begging the question. To think that it is possible that a being that is maximally excellent exists in every possible world is already to accept that it is possible that it is necessarily true that this being exists. Second, we can object that (P2) - Plantinga's definition of maximal greatness - is unsatisfactory. The definition presupposes that x's greatness in a world in which x exists exceeds x's greatness in a world in which x doesn't exist. We can object that this type of comparison doesn't make sense. In a world in which x doesn't exist, x doesn't have zero degree of greatness. Instead, we can't talk of x's degree of greatness at all. If there is no x, then x has no degree of greatness, not even zero. So we can't compare x's greatness where x does exist with x's greatness where x doesn't exist. It is not greater to exist than not to exist.

If this objection is right, then we should redefine a maximally great being as a being that is maximally excellent in every world in which it exists. So in every possible world in which God exists, God is the greatest possible being. But because the greatest possible being need not exist in every possible world, it is still possible that God does not exist. So we cannot conclude that God exists.