

The Ontological Argument

Saint Anselm offers a very unique and interesting argument for the existence of God. It is an “a priori” argument. That is, it is an argument or proof that one might give *independent of experience*—i.e., in order to be convinced by Anselm’s proof, we will not need to perform any experiments, or have any experiences of the world, etc. Rather, all we need to do to be convinced is contemplate the meaning of the word “God.”

The basic idea behind the ontological argument is that, simply by understanding the CONCEPT of God, we come to the conclusion that God must exist.

1. Essential properties: Before understanding Anselm’s argument, one should grasp what it means for something to be an “essential property.”

Imagine a triangle. Is it possible to imagine a triangle without 3 sides? Of course not. If you are imagining a figure that has some other number of sides, you are simply NOT IMAGINING A TRIANGLE. But, is it possible to imagine a triangle whose interior angles do not add up to 180 degrees? No. Once again, if you are imagining a figure whose interior angles do not add up to 180 degrees, you are simply imagining something that is NOT a triangle.

But, this is just to say of “3-sidedness” and “having interior angles that add up to 180 degrees” that these properties are ESSENTIAL to triangles. In other words, these things are a part of the ESSENCE of BEING a triangle; and, if you try to imagine a triangle without one of its essential properties, you are simply imagining something that is not a triangle.

2. The Ontological Argument: As we saw last time, God is typically defined as a “supremely perfect” being. Anselm uses the term “something than which nothing greater can be thought.” Anselm takes this to mean that God possesses ALL of the properties that make one great. Being the GREATEST or MOST PERFECT being is a part of the very concept of God.

Now, God is like the triangle in that certain concepts are ESSENTIAL to the concept of God; namely, all of the properties that make one great, or perfect. In order to determine what properties are essential to God, we can simply ask the question, “Would God be greater if He had that property, or greater if He did not?” If God would be greater if He HAS some property, then He must have it (since God is the greatest possible being).

For instance, consider knowledge: It seems like God would be greater if He has some knowledge than if He does not. Then, it must be that the concept of God—the GREATEST conceivable being—includes something like “being that has some knowledge”. But, He must not just have SOME knowledge. Rather, He must have PERFECT knowledge, since God is the greatest, and it would be greater to have ALL the knowledge that one could have, rather than just some limited amount of knowledge. It follows that the concept of God includes omniscience (absolute knowledge). We can use similar reasoning to determine that the concept of God must also include omnipotence (absolute power) and omnibenevolence (moral perfection).

But, wait. It seems like it is better to exist in reality than merely exist in the mind alone. If I told you that I had two awesome pizzas at home, one real and one imaginary, and asked you which one it would be better to have, it would make sense for you to say, “The real one. The imaginary one doesn’t sound all that great.”

But, in that case, **existence** (like knowledge, power, and moral goodness) is ALSO a great-making characteristic. So, it must follow that existence (in reality, rather than in the mind alone) is ALSO included in the concept of God, and is therefore an essential property of God.

In other words, it is impossible to conceive of a “supremely perfect” being that does not exist. If we tried, we would just be imagining something that is NOT GOD. For, if we are imagining “God” as merely existing in our minds and not in reality, we are just imagining some LESS THAN supremely perfect being; it would be possible to imagine an even MORE perfect being still—namely, one that EXISTS IN REALITY (because existing in the mind alone is less perfect than existing in reality).

Therefore, God exists.

One more time: Since existence is a great-making characteristic (i.e., it is better to exist than not exist), then it must be included in the concept of God, which is by definition “the GREATEST conceivable being” or “the being with ALL of the great-making characteristics”. Therefore, existence is one of the essential properties of a supremely perfect God. But, an essential property is one that INSEPARABLE from a thing. This means that to imagine God as not existing in reality is a contradiction (or else, you’re not really imagining God at all).

In other words, the claim “God does not exist” is as self-contradictory as the claim, “Triangles do not have 3 sides.” For, existence is a part of the very CONCEPT of God.

So, God must exist in reality.

We might state this in argument form, as the following:

1. God is, by definition, the greatest conceivable being.
2. We have a mental concept of the greatest conceivable being.
3. To exist in reality is greater than merely existing in the mind alone.
4. Therefore, if you are considering the concept of God, then you are considering a being that exists in reality.

Note: If the thing you are considering exists merely in the mind, then either:

- (a) You are NOT imagining the greatest conceivable being.
 - (b) You are imagining a contradiction (the greatest conceivable being both existing and not existing); but this is impossible.
5. So, the being you have a concept of is one that exists in reality; i.e., God exists.

Objection: Just because “3-sidedness” is an essential property of triangles, this does not prove that triangles EXIST. It seems coherent to think of a triangle that exists only in my mind, and not in reality. So, why is God different?

Reply: Because, we’re not attributing something like “3-sidedness” to God as an essential property. We are attributing EXISTENCE to God as an essential property. This makes God a special case. As such, God is the only being that can be demonstrated to exist merely by thinking about its attributes.

3. Gaunilo’s Criticism: Is God really the ONLY being that can be demonstrated to exist in this way? Gaunilo, a contemporary of Anselm’s, criticizes the above line of reasoning for leading to absurd conclusions. He thinks that, if Anselm’s reasoning can be used to prove that God exists, then it can also be used to prove that ALL SORTS of things exist.

For instance, consider “The Lost Island”: It is the most perfect possible island. It has perfect sand, perfect waterfalls, and the perfect number of coconuts. These are all essential properties of the island. But, it furthermore has the essential property of existing in reality, since the island would be less perfect if it existed in the mind alone. Therefore, the perfect island exists in reality.

This sort of criticism is known as a “reductio ad absurdum.” This method of attack attempts to show that some line of reasoning that is thought to be correct actually leads to absurdities—and for this reason, we should actually reject the line of reasoning as mistaken. Since Anselm’s line of reasoning leads to the absurd conclusion that the perfect island exists (as well as the perfect pizza, and the perfect toilet, and the perfect paper clip), his line of reasoning must be mistaken.

Anselm's Reply: Anselm responded by insisting that God was the only sort of being to which his reasoning applied. Why does Anselm think this?

First, we might think that certain sorts of "perfections" are impossible. For instance, what IS the "most perfect" number of coconuts for an island to have? The question does not seem to make sense. Other properties, such as knowledge, do not seem to have this problem. For instance, the "most perfect" amount of knowledge just seems to be ALL the knowledge that it is possible to have. (In contrast, an island that had "all" the coconuts sounds like a very crowded island.)

In short, it seems like the only sorts of properties that can BE possessed perfectly are those that have MAXIMUM LIMITS. Just as there is no highest number, for SOME properties (such as number of coconuts), there is no perfect limit to that property. Now, imagine a being that possessed knowledge perfectly. Can you imagine that being as NOT knowing what "2+2" equals? NO, you CANNOT. For, you would either be imagining a contradiction (a perfect-knowledge being with imperfect knowledge), or else you are simply not imagining a being that possesses knowledge perfectly.

It seems as if imagining a being with the maximum amount of a great-making property THAT HAS A MAXIMUM LIMIT is coherent. So, now imagine a being that has ALL the great-making properties that have a maximum limit. It seems that this being would also have to possess the great-making property of existing in reality. And this, supposedly, only applies to the being that has ALL the maximal-great-making properties.

4. Kant's Criticism: Immanuel Kant offered another criticism about 700 years later. Rather than trying to demonstrate that Anselm's reasoning leads to absurdities, he actually pointed out what the flaw in the reasoning was: Existence is not a great-making property. In fact, it is not a property at all!

1. Subjects and Predicates: In his Ontological Argument, Anselm claims that a contradiction arises when you assert "God does not exist" because the predicate "existence" is one of the predicates contained within the concept "God." In other words, since existence is an essential property of God, saying "God does not exist" is like saying, "God, who exists, does not exist", or "A triangle does not have three sides" (since three-sidedness is an essential property of triangles).

But, Kant says, a contradiction only arises when you assert the EXISTENCE of a subject without one or more of its essential properties. For instance, it WOULD be a contradiction to say that, "A triangle exists, but it lacks three sides" or "There is a bachelor who is not male." This is because "three-sidedness" is ESSENTIAL to triangles, and being male is ESSENTIAL to bachelors.

Kant states that, when we give a list of some thing's essential properties, ALL we can infer from this is that, IF that thing exists, then it definitely has those properties. For instance, because triangles are essentially 3-sided, we may only infer that, "IF a triangle exists, then it definitely has 3 sides." Similarly, even if existence is a part of the concept of God (since existence is one of the "great-making properties"), all this entails is that, "IF God exists, then He exists." And this is uninteresting, since it is trivially true.

To deny the existence of the entity altogether, Kant says, is never a contradiction. For, in that case, all that you are asserting is that the concept itself, with all of its properties, is not instantiated anywhere (i.e., it is nowhere to be found). So, no contradiction arises. You're simply denying the existence of the object altogether.

Admittedly, if Anselm's interpretation of the denial of God's existence were correct, it WOULD be a contradiction—for, then, denying God's existence would be equivalent to stating: "God exists, yet He lacks existence." But, Kant points out, the correct interpretation of the denial of God's existence is simply the claim that "There is no existing thing that the concept of God identifies." Kant writes,

when you say, God does not exist, neither omnipotence nor any other predicate is affirmed; they must all disappear with the subject, and in this judgment there cannot exist the least self-contradiction.

To illustrate this point, consider: I am imagining Sunshine, the unicorn, in my mind right now. Consider a list of attributes that Sunshine has:

- Horse-shape
- Horned
- Pure white
- Super soft
- Fast
- Immortal
- Farts rainbows
- Exists

Imagine that you tell me, "Sunshine does not exist." Is this coherent? Now, according to Anselm, to deny the existence of Sunshine is to say something like "Something HAS all of these attributes, and does not exist." If he were right, then the denial of Sunshine's existence would be equivalent to the claim that "Sunshine exists, and does not exist." So, since the denial of Sunshine's existence is self-contradictory, it must be false. So, have we now proved that there ARE existing unicorns? Clearly not.

According to Kant, if I deny the existence of Sunshine, I am simply denying that there IS anything that exists which instantiates this whole list of properties. Denying the existence of sunshine is simply to CLEAR AWAY this WHOLE list of attributes and deny that they apply to anything.

2. "Existence" is not a predicate: Why doesn't the fact that we have a coherent concept of Sunshine, "an existing unicorn", prove that there IS one? Where have we gone wrong?

Kant states that the mistake is made when we treat "existence" as a predicate. A predicate is a thing you ascribe to a subject, and it is supposed to ADD something to the concept of that subject. For instance, I might say, "Imagine a one hundred dollar bill. ...Now imagine that the bill is *crumpled*." Here, "crumpled" is a predicate (or, property) which ADDS something to your concept of the hundred dollar bill. But, imagine that I then say, "Now imagine that the crumpled bill EXISTS." Have I added anything to your concept? Do you now picture the bill in some new way? Kant says no. **Existence does not add anything to the concept.**

Existence, Kant says, does not function grammatically as a predicate, but rather as a copula. For instance, when we say, "The bill is crumpled," we are uniting two concepts: the bill, and crumpled. Predicates ADD something to a subject; i.e., "crumpled" ADDS something to our concept of the bill. In contrast, the word "is" merely indicates the relation between the subject and the predicate. This is the function of a copula. So, **existence is not a predicate.**

Any time we say that some subject IS some way—e.g., the bill IS crumpled—we're already attributing existence to the bill. So, strictly speaking, we should not say that God IS omniscient, omnipotent, etc. Rather, we should say simply that, IF God exists, THEN He is omniscient, omnipotent, etc.

So, the denial of Sunshine's existence is not equivalent to "Sunshine, who has the property of existing, does not exist." All we really mean is "There is no existing thing that is horse-shaped, has a horn, is white, soft, farts rainbows, and so on."

Likewise, with God. If existence is not a predicate, then it is not one of the "perfections" that the supremely perfect being needs to possess. If existence is not a predicate, not only is existence not a "great-making" property. IT IS NOT A PROPERTY AT ALL. So, the denial of God's existence is not the assertion of the contradictory statement, "God, who has the property of existing, does not exist." Rather, we simply mean that "There is no existing thing that has the properties of omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and so on." And that is not a contradiction.

5. Peter van Inwagen’s Explanation of the Confusion: van Inwagen puts it this way:

The author Homer is generally thought to have these attributes: He was a blind, male Greek poet from the 8th century BC, who wrote *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

Now imagine that (as is actually the case) two scholars disagree, one believing that Homer actually existed, and the other believing that Homer is a fictitious legend. It would be absurd to suggest that the first scholar believes that someone was a blind, male Greek poet from the 8th century BC, and wrote *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and existed, while the second scholar believes that someone was a blind, male Greek poet from the 8th century BC, and wrote *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and did not exist.

Simply put, predicates (or, properties) are the “ingredients” of a concept, or items that pinpoint what it is to fall under a certain concept. But, existence is not a thing that CAN be such an ingredient. What these two scholars are disagreeing about is whether or not there was ever any individual who INSTANTIATED the properties of “blind, male Greek poet from the 8th century BC, who wrote *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.”

Confusion of Two Separate “Arguments”: van Inwagen then points out that the ontological argument is really muddling the following two separate arguments together:

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Anything that is a perfect being has all perfections.2. Existence is a perfection.3. Therefore, anything that is a perfect being exists.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. There is a perfect being that has all perfections.2. Existence is a perfection.3. Therefore, there is a perfect being that exists.
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The first argument is rather uninteresting. Its conclusion is trivial, and does not prove that God exists. The second argument “begs the question”—that is, the conclusion is just a re-statement of the first premise (i.e., the premise assumes the very thing that is supposed to be proved).

The reason the ontological argument may SEEM valid at first is because the reader takes the argument to be claiming the premise one on the LEFT (in red), and, along with premise 2 (which both arguments have in common), drawing the conclusion on the RIGHT (in red). Clearly, this would be a mistake.