
The Ontological Argument

Original here: <http://www.unc.edu/~megw/OntologicalArg.html>

Below is a summary of one of the more famous versions of the Ontological Argument, that of Saint Anselm of Canterbury in his *Proslogium*. This is very similar to Descartes' version of the Ontological Argument in his *Meditations*, which will be discussed in lecture. You can read an electronic version of Anselm's argument [here](#); you can read an electronic copy of Descartes' *Meditations* [here](#).

(I) Introduction

One of the allures of the Ontological Argument is primarily due to the fact that it claims to be *a priori*. That is, it attempts to prove God's existence by reason alone, independent of experience. Roughly, the thought behind the argument is that just by contemplating our idea of God--without having to look out in the world or find any sort of empirical proof--we can come to conclude that God must exist.

Another interesting feature of this argument is that it has the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. This means that it begins with an assumption that is precisely contrary to what it sets out to prove--consequently, the argument begins by supposing that God does *not* exist. From this assumption, the strategy is then to show that a contradiction or absurdity logically follows, in which case we must reject the original supposition and accept its contrary--namely, that God *does* exist.

(For more on *a priori* and *reductio* arguments, go to my logic page [here](#).)

(II) Summary of Argument

Defining God

Think of God as the greatest conceivable being, or as "something than which nothing greater can be conceived." To get a grasp on this, take every great-making attribute you like--wisdom, power, knowledge, moral goodness, etc.--amplify it to its limit, and there you've got God. If you can think of anything greater than what you've just thought of, then you haven't succeeded in thinking about the thing than which nothing greater can be conceived.

Notice that just thinking of such a being does not (yet!) commit you to thinking that such a being exists. For consider: even if you think that such a 'greatest conceivable being' does not exist, you at least have the ability to understand or have an idea of what such a being would be like. That is, you can, at the very least, understand what such a being would be like. And this is all the argument needs to get it going: so long as you can at least understand the idea of a *greatest conceivable being*, it will be shown that such a being *must* exist.

Existing in the Mind vs. Existing in Reality

Next, we need to make sense of the difference between *existing in the mind* and *existing in reality*. Intuitively, many things can exist in the mind alone without existing in reality. For example, unicorns, wizards, and the fountain of youth are all things that exist in the mind alone, but do not exist in reality. In contrast, there might be some things that exist in reality, but do not exist in the mind. For instance, there could be some totally crazy looking beetle that has not yet been thought of in the minds of men, but nonetheless exists in the world. So there are some things that exist in the mind alone, that need not exist in reality; and there are some things that exist in reality, that need not exist in the mind.

Setting Up the Reductio

Let's suppose that the Greatest Conceivable Being exists in the mind alone, but *not* in reality. This might seem a really backwards way to the conclusion--after all, this is an argument *for* the existence of God. That is, this is an argument to the conclusion that God *exists in reality*, as well as in the mind. But this is the nature of a *reductio ad absurdum*. One assumes the contrary of what one is trying to prove in order to show that a contradiction or absurdity follows. So this argument will start out assuming that the Greatest Conceivable Being exists in the mind alone, but not in reality.

Existing in Reality Makes Things Greater!

A crucial premise in the Ontological Argument is the claim that existing in reality is a great-making property. Intuitively, this isn't such a crazy claim. For consider: Suppose we have an imagined beer that exists in the mind alone. Make this pint of beer anything you like--make it as cold as you like, as bitter or hoppy as you like, etc.--but make sure that it exists in the mind alone, and not in reality. Nice, right? But not of much good to us, if we were thirsty for a cold one. But now compare this merely imagined beer to one that's not only imagined, but one that actually exists. That is, we want to consider the situation where our beer not only exists in the mind, but exists in reality as well. Presumably, it is better that the pint of beer exists in reality, as well as in the mind, rather than the beer existing in the mind alone. At least, it's pretty clear which one you'd prefer given that you've got a considerable thirst. So, intuitively, things that exist in reality, as well as in the mind, are *greater* than things that exist in the mind alone.

Showing an Absurdity Follows

To recapitulate, we have assumed that the Greatest Conceivable Being exists in the mind alone, and not in reality. But we have also agreed that a thing that exists in reality, as well as in the mind, is greater than a thing that exists in the mind alone. At this point, we're in trouble! For we can now think of a being greater than the Greatest Conceivable Being--namely, one that exists. Thus, the Greatest Conceivable Being--the being than which nothing greater can be conceived--is a being than which *something* greater *can* be conceived. This is a contradiction! Therefore, the original assumption--that the Greatest Conceivable Being exists in the mind alone--must be false, and its contrary must be true. That is, the Greatest Conceivable Being must exist in reality as well as in the mind.

(III) Formalizing the Argument

1. Suppose that the Greatest Conceivable Being exists in the mind, but not in reality. [Let's call this imaginary being Rod.]
2. Existence in reality is greater than existence in the mind alone.
3. We can conceive a Greatest Conceivable Being that exists in reality as well as in the mind. [Let's call this being Todd]
4. Therefore, there is a being [Todd] that is *greater* than the Greatest Conceivable Being [Rod].
5. But this is a contradiction: there cannot be a being *greater* than the Greatest Conceivable Being.
6. Therefore, it is false that the Greatest Conceivable Being exists in the mind alone and not in reality. And, since we have already agreed that the Greatest Conceivable Being *at least* exists in the mind, it must exist in reality as well. So: GOD EXISTS!

(IV) Objections

1. Guanilo's Perfect Island Objection

Guanilo suggests that something has seriously gone awry in the Ontological Argument. To show this, he devises a similar argument, resulting in a conclusion that we *know* to be false. He suggests that we run a parallel argument with one minor alteration--replace the Greatest Conceivable *Being* with the Greatest

Conceivable *Island*. The replacement argument can be formalized in the following way:

1. Suppose that the Greatest Conceivable Island exists in the mind, but not in reality. [Let's call this imaginary island Ned.]
2. Existence in reality is greater than existence in the mind alone.
3. We can conceive a Greatest Conceivable Island that exists in reality as well as in the mind. [Let's call this island Maud.]
4. Therefore, there is a island [Maud] that is *greater* than the Greatest Conceivable Island [Ned].
5. But this is a contradiction: there cannot be an island *greater* than the Greatest Conceivable Island.
6. Therefore, it is false that the Greatest Conceivable Island exists in the mind alone and not in reality. And, since we have already agreed that the Greatest Conceivable Island *at least* exists in the mind, it must exist in reality as well. So: The Greatest Conceivable Island EXISTS!

Guanilo's point is that if the Ontological Argument goes through, then we should be able to reason similarly for the greatest conceivable *island*. Indeed, we presumably should be able to run it for the greatest conceivable *anything-you-like*: the greatest conceivable lover, the greatest conceivable beer, the greatest conceivable evil being, etc. Yet since it is clear that there is no greatest conceivable island, lover, beer, evil being, etc., something is amiss with the argument.

In class, I've talked about how there are two main ways to refute an argument: (i) attack the form of the argument or (ii) claim that (at least) one of the premises is false. Notice that Guanilo's Perfect Island Objection is doing the first.

Anselm's Response:

You can read Anselm's response to Guanilo's objection [here](#). I admit that I have difficulty trying to understand his response, if it is supposed to be something more than just restating his original argument (and thus not really addressing Guanilo's argument at all). But he does say the following:

"BUT, you say, it is as if one should suppose an island in the ocean, which surpasses all lands in its fertility, and which, because of the difficulty, or the impossibility, of discovering what does not exist, is called a lost island; and should say that there be no doubt that this island truly exists in reality, for this reason, that one who hears it described easily understands what he hears.

Now I promise confidently that if any man shall devise anything existing either in reality or in concept alone (except that than which a greater be conceived) to which he can adapt the sequence of my reasoning, I will discover that thing, and will give him his lost island, not to be lost again.

But it now appears that this being than which a greater is inconceivable cannot be conceived not to be, because it exists on so assured a ground of truth; for otherwise it would not exist at all."

In class I suggested that the above blurb points to the following response: in the original argument, the supposition is that we are talking about the greatest conceivable *being*. But this could have easily been generalized to the greasiest conceivable *thing*. When it is left open as to what the greatest conceivable thing *is*, then notice that there do not have to be limitations on the object under consideration as there would be if we needed to qualify the object *as* a particular thing or other. If we must conceive of the greatest conceivable *island*, for example, then there are certain attributes that this island must have in order to qualify *as* an island. It must be surrounded by ocean on all sides, for instance. Or it may have to have been formed in a particular way--by a volcano, say. And it must be a land mass, so it must qualify *as* land, with sand and rocks, etc. And may have to have coconuts on it, or certain vegetation, or a particular monkey to palm leaf ratio, etc.

But the very qualities that make something an island may conflict with the very qualities that make something

the greatest conceivable *thing*. To see this, notice that we can play the *which one is greater?* game. Which one is greater: an island that knows things, or an island that doesn't? Clearly, an island that *knew* what was going on would be greater than one that didn't, or couldn't. OK. So, which would be greater: an island that knows *everything*, or an island that knows only some things. Clearly, an island that knows everything. OK. So, which would be greater: an island that is benevolent and can do morally good actions, or one that is morally neutral, or even worse--morally malevolent? Clearly, a benevolent island is better than a non-benevolent one. OK. So, which is greater an island that is benevolent all of the time and in all ways, or an island the is benevolent only some of the time and in only some ways? Clearly, the first. And which is greater: an island that has powers, or one that is inert? Clearly, one that has power. And so on. Indeed, after we have played the *which one is greater?* game, what we presumably end up with is something more like a God and less like an island. In fact, we could even ask which is greater? An island that is located in only one spot and not others? Or an island that can be everywhere all at once? What we'd eventually end up with is an omnipresent 'island' that is *nothing like an island at all!* This is because those qualities which make something greater *simpliciter* are in conflict with those qualities which make something a greater *island*.

Anselm's original argument, in other words, is a demand for the greatest conceivable *thing-whatsoever*; a greatest conceivable *thing-in-particular* is necessarily limited in certain ways (indeed, in all of the ways it has to be in order to qualify *as* a particular thing or other), and so a greatest conceivable *thing-in-particular* can never be the greatest conceivable *thing-whatsoever*.

And this, I take it, is what Anselm is getting at when he says: "Now I promise confidently that if any man shall devise *anything* existing either in reality or in concept alone (except that than which a greater be conceived) to which he can adapt the sequence of my reasoning, I will discover that *thing*, and will give him his lost island, not to be lost again." (Emphasis mine.) Basically, if you can think of a greatest conceivable *thing*, and that thing ends up being an island, then so be it: the island exists. But, given that the greatest conceivable *thing* is probably *not* an island (for reasons alluded to by the *which one is greater?* game), Anselm is confident that the argument won't deliver us a greatest conceivable *island*.

(Note: this is just my take on Anselm's response; it is probably incorrect. However, the response is still available as a move to be made in logical space, so I will leave at as move to be made on Anselm's behalf, if he did not indeed have this in mind himself.)

2. Existence is Not a Predicate (Kant)

Immanuel Kant objects that "existence" is not a predicate in the way that "red", "six feet tall", and "wacky" are. For example, if someone says "the castle is blue", the speaker is attributing a property--blueness--to the castle. Yet when you say "the castle exists", you are not, strictly speaking, attributing anything to the castle. Rather, you are saying that the castle is instantiated, or exists in the world. In other words, we aren't really adding anything to our idea of the castle, but to our idea of the *world*, and the way that *it* is--namely, that it is such that the castle is *in* it.

To illustrate the above point, consider the following examples.

1. Consider a table. Now abstract away all of its properties *except* existence. That is, imagine that you could leave it existing without all of its other properties: color, shape, size, function, and so on. But what is the difference between existence alone and nothing at all?

2. Lisa and Jane are both compiling lists of the qualities of the perfect mate so that they can each put an add in the personals. Since Lisa and Jane have similar tastes, they both end up with the following add: "Intelligent, hot chick in search of good-looking male, with an affinity for doling out compliments, playing pool til dawn,

and talking philosophy until the cows come home." In fact, the only respect in which Jane's ad differs from Lisa's is that Jane has supplemented the forgoing blurb with the extra qualification: "and must exist." Now, is Jane's ad really any better than Lisa's? No. Moreover, Jane has misunderstood the purpose of the list, which is to set forth the qualities of a perfect mate. It is another matter whether these qualities are exemplified in an actual guy. Jane and Lisa can decide what they want to put into their description of the perfect guy, but the world decides whether anybody meets such a description.

3. We cannot simply build existence into our concept of things, yet it seems we have no problem doing this with regular predicates. For example, suppose we define a unicorn as "a one horned magical horse that exists." One might then claim that unicorns exist. But, of course, this is just a verbal trick. Nothing but the world can determine whether something fitting our concepts exists or not, and wishing it doesn't make it so. Contrast this, however, with regular predicates. If I define "smelloozer" as someone who drinks heavily and smells funny, then we can (uncontroversially!) claim that smelloozers drink heavily and smell funny. So we can build predicates into our definitions, but not existence. So, existence must not be a predicate.

Notice that the strategy of this objection is to indirectly attack the truth of premise 2 (existence in reality is greater than existence in the mind alone). For an underlying assumption of the truth of premise 2 is that existence is a predicate like 'blue', 'round' and 'groovy' are. So, unlike Guanilo's objection, which attacks the form of the Ontological Argument, Kant's objection attacks the truth of one of the premises (viz., premise 2).

3. Inconceivability Objection

Consider the series of positive integers: 1, 2, 3, etc. Now suppose I ask you to imagine the *greatest conceivable integer*. Rightly so, you should be a bit dumbfounded, as it is quite obvious that the positive integers are not the sort of thing that admit of a "greatest" member. That is, for any integer you can think of, there will always be one greater. (In fact, there will always be infinitely many integers greater than the one you have in mind.) In this way, the Greatest Conceivable Integer is an impossible object. This objection claims that the idea of the Greatest Conceivable Being is like the idea of the Greatest Conceivable Integer--impossible!

Like Kant's objection, the strategy of this objection is to undermine the truth of one of the premises--viz., premise 1. The truth of premise one relies on our ability to at least conceive or imagine the greatest conceivable being. But if the Inconceivability objection is correct, then we cannot conceive or imagine the Greatest Conceivable Being, and hence, we won't be able to make the supposition--premise 1--that gets the whole reductio going in the first place.

4. Existence in Reality vs. Existence in the Mind

One problem we might have with Anselm's ontological argument has to do with the distinction between 'existing in reality' and 'existing in the mind.' This distinction suggests that there are two ways for some *thing* to exist—in the mind and in reality. But what sense is there in thinking that a thing exists at all when it 'exists in the mind'? For it isn't at all clear how the identity conditions work out for things that exist in the mind. If I ask two people to imagine a pink elephant, for example, are the two people imagining the same elephant or not? If a pink elephant were to run around the corner, would the two people think, 'aha, I see that the pink elephant that exists in the understanding exists in reality as well'? Or could one think, 'no, that's not the pink elephant that exists in *my* understanding; mine doesn't exist in reality at all.'? Another example: if, like Anselm's painter, two artists imagine a painting in their head—such that Anselm would count the ideas of the painting as things that exist in the understanding—then is it enough that only one of the artists actually paints the painting in order for whatever it is that exists in the understanding to exist in reality as well, resulting in only one painting? Or would each painter have to paint separately and individually whatever it is

that exists in the understanding before the painting(s) exists in reality, resulting in two non-identical paintings? Is there any way to tell the difference? If not, it seems we don't have a criterion of identity for things that 'exist in the understanding', and so we should be suspicious that this is a legitimate notion of existence.

Put another way: we know what it takes for something(s) to be one thing or two when it (they) exist in reality (note: we will hopefully be spending some time in class discussing this point, so don't worry for now if it isn't so clear to you). But this isn't the case with things that exist in the mind. For how are we to know whether the pink elephant that one person understands and the pink elephant that another understands are one and the same elephant? Put in terms of Qualitative and Quantitative (or Numerical) Identity:

Numerical identity is the relation that each thing holds to itself--e.g., I am numerically identical to myself, you are numerically identical to yourself, Jon Stewart is identical to himself, etc. If x is *numerically identical* to y , then x and y are *one* in number; "they" are one.

Qualitative identity, on the other hand, is the relation that many things can have to many others, provided that they have the same properties in common. For example, in class I talked about how two markers could have many of the same properties--e.g., they could both be white on the outside, with a black felt tip, a black plastic cap, cylindrical in shape, so many inches long, kept in a cardboard box, etc.--yet since they are *two* markers they are not *numerically* identical. Rather, they merely share some of their properties, or *qualities*--they are qualitatively identical--but they are not one and the same, numerically identical, marker.

How are we to distinguish between merely qualitatively identical (or exactly similar) pink elephants that merely exist in the mind, from truly quantitatively (or numerically) identical pink elephants that exist in the mind? Unless entities are extended in the world—unless they exist in reality—there seems to be no other sense in which 'they' can be, or exist.

This objection would be another way to reject the truth of premise 2, since this premise presupposes that the distinction between existence in the mind and existence in reality is a legitimate one.

5. What does "greater" mean?

Anselm's ontological argument relies on the claim that something that exists in reality as well as in the mind is *greater* than something that exists in the mind alone (premise 2). We might wonder in what way existence in reality makes something that exists in the mind *greater*.

Certainly if one were to consider particular things—such as an ice-cold pitcher of beer or the perfect mate—we would much *prefer* that these things exist in reality than merely existing in the understanding alone. We might even say that the beer and mate that exist in the understanding are somehow 'bettered'—and, moreover, that the *world itself* is 'bettered'—if these presumably good things come to exist in reality (as well as in the understanding). However, particular other things—such as an overly vinegary bottle of wine or the most *imperfect*, annoying mate—would be things that that we would not think would be made greater if they actually existed. That is, in so far as we think that 'greater' means something like 'better' or 'more improved', it doesn't seem that annoying and evil things would be made 'better' or 'more improved' if they existed in reality as well as in the understanding. On the contrary, these things, among countless others, would presumably be *worse* if they existed. What's more, the *world itself* would surely be worse if these things existed in reality rather than just existing in the mind alone. So 'greater' cannot mean something like 'makes the world a better place' or makes the thing itself a 'better' thing, or else Anselm's premise 2 would clearly be false. It seems clear that certain things that exist merely in the understanding should *stay* that way, and that nothing 'great' or 'good' would come from them existing in reality. And so, in an attempt to find a plausible interpretation of premise 2 above—to find an interpretation of this premise that might at least have a shot at

being true—Anselm must have had something else in mind when he uses that predicate ‘greater.’

So what else could Anselm have meant by ‘greater’? Well, first, it is clear that there are a few things he couldn’t have meant. For example, he couldn’t have meant ‘bigger’ or ‘heavier’ or ‘more powerful’. For even though we typically, in ordinary usage, use the predicate ‘greater’ to mean these things, it’s not clear that we could even make sense of these predicates when applied to the things that ‘exist in reality and in the understanding’ or to those things that ‘exist in the understanding alone’. For example, is a five-pound turkey that exists in reality as well as the understanding ‘bigger’ or ‘heavier’ or ‘more powerful’ than a five-pound turkey that exists in the understanding alone? On one way of reading the question, the answer seems vacuously true, since turkeys that exist merely in the understanding don’t seem to be any particular size, weigh any particular amount of weight, or have any sort of power. Indeed, since things that exist in the understanding don’t exist in reality, it’s hard to see how they have any properties whatsoever; for things that don’t exist (in reality) can’t have any properties *at all*. But then, if *this* is what Anselm meant by ‘greater’ then it doesn’t seem to be of much help. For this would just amount to saying: things that exist merely in the understanding don’t have any properties, so *of course* things that exist in reality are ‘bigger’ and ‘heavier’ and ‘more powerful’ than things that exist merely in the understanding. Unfortunately, this sort of ‘greatness’ is way too easily had. For not only are things that exist in reality ‘heavier,’ ‘bigger,’ and ‘more powerful’ than things that exist merely in the understanding; they are also ‘lighter,’ ‘smaller’ and ‘disappointingly less powerful’ than things that exist merely in the understanding. Comparative properties come cheap when one of the compared objects fails to have any properties whatsoever.

However, if you thought that things that exist in the understanding might have properties—if you thought that turkeys in the understanding have as much size and weight and power that is attributed to them, then you will have to say that the turkey that exists merely in the understanding is the same size, has the same weight, and has just as much power as it would if it existed in reality as well. To see this, ask yourself which weighs more?: a five-pound turkey in the understanding, or a five-pound turkey in reality? If, in light of the objection given in the previous paragraph, you are going to claim that objects that merely exist in the understanding have all of the properties that are attributed to them, then you will have to maintain that both the five pound turkey that exists in the understanding and the five pound turkey that exists both in the understanding and in reality each weigh the same. In which case, however, existence in reality doesn’t make something ‘greater’, if by ‘greater’ we mean ‘heavier.’ And similarly for ‘bigger’ and ‘more powerful.’

So either the things that exist merely in the understanding have the properties associated with them or not. If they do, then it is not clear how a thing that exists in the understanding can be ‘greater’ if it exists in reality, if by ‘greater’ we mean ‘bigger’ or ‘heavier’ or ‘more powerful.’ For a thing that exists merely in the understanding will have just as much size, weight, and power whether it comes to exist in reality or not, since size, weight, and power are simply attributes that (we have assumed) will be true of a thing whether or not a thing that exists in the understanding exists in reality as well. However, if the things that exist in the understanding do not have the properties associated with them, then the claim that existence in reality is greater existence in the understanding alone is vacuously true. And it would be just as true to say, then, that existence in reality (as well as in the understanding) is ‘less great’ than existence in the understanding alone. So there must be something else that Anselm meant by premise 2.

Perhaps he meant something like ‘more causally efficacious’? Or perhaps he meant by ‘greater than’ something like ‘more vivid’, ‘louder’ or ‘more amplified’? We will discuss these options in class.

(V) Some Questions to Think About

What do you think that Anselm can say in response to some of the objections above? In class I suggested some of the moves he might make. Do find any of them plausible? Which ones and why? Do you think that

the argument ultimately works? Or do you think that one of the above objections (or any others you might have thought of) are ultimately devastating to the argument? If the latter, which objection do you think is the most damaging? Can you think of any other ways to run this argument than in the way that Anselm did? If so, is this alternative better or worse and if so, how? Discussion of these questions and more in class...

Sources:

Saint Anselm, [*Proslogium*](#).

William L. Rowe, "The Ontological Argument" in *Reason and Responsibility*, ed. Landau & Shafer-Landau.

Gideon Rosen, "[Anselm's Ontological Argument](#)," Rosen's webpage summary on the Ontological Argument.

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