

Milestones in the Ontological Argument

1078: St. Anselm, Proslogion. Followed soon after by Gaunilo's critique In Behalf of the Fool.

1264: St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa. Criticises an argument that somehow descends from St. Anselm.

1637: Descartes, Meditations. The Objections and the Replies contain much valuable discussion of the Cartesian arguments.

1709: Leibniz, New Essays Concerning Human Understanding. Contains Leibniz's attempt to complete the Cartesian argument by showing that the Cartesian conception of God is not inconsistent.

1776: Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. Part IX is a general attack on a priori arguments (both analytic and synthetic). Includes a purported demonstration that no such arguments can be any good.

1787: Kant, Critique of Pure Reason. Contains famous attack on traditional theistic arguments. Three objections to "the ontological argument", including the famous objection based on the dictum that existence is not a predicate.

1960: Malcolm, "Anselm's Ontological Argument". Defence of modal ontological arguments by a famous ordinary philosopher.

1974: Plantinga, The Nature of Necessity. Plantinga's modal ontological argument.

Summary (enlarge to A3)

Anselm's First Version

If, therefore, that than which greater cannot be thought exists in thought alone, then that than which greater cannot be thought turns out to be that than which something greater actually can be thought, but that is obviously impossible. Therefore something than which greater cannot be thought undoubtedly exists both in thought and in reality.

Anselm's Second Version

In fact, it so undoubtedly exists that it cannot be thought of as not existing. For one can think there exists something that cannot be thought of as not existing, and that would be greater than something which can be thought of as not existing. For if that greater than which cannot be thought can be thought of as not existing, then that greater than which cannot be thought is not that greater than which cannot be thought, which does not make sense. Thus that than which nothing can be thought so undoubtedly exists that it cannot even be thought of as not existing.

René Descartes, 1596 - 1650, is also credited with formulating versions of the ontological argument. *'But nevertheless, when I think more attentively, I find that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than from the essence of a rectilinear triangle can be separated the equality of its three angles to two right angles, or, indeed, if you please, from the idea of a mountain the idea of a valley; so that there would be no less contradiction in conceiving of a God --that is, of a being supremely perfect, to whom existence was wanting, that is to say, to whom there was wanting any perfection --than in conceiving of a mountain which had no valley.'*

Version A:

Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive to be contained in the idea of something is true of that thing.

I clearly and distinctly perceive that necessary existence is contained in the idea of God.

Therefore, God exists.

Version B:

I have an idea of supremely perfect being, i.e. a being having all perfections.

Necessary existence is a perfection.

Therefore, a supremely perfect being exists.

Norman Malcolm's Restatement of Anselm's 2nd Version

1. Consider the idea of God. God is a being that is absolutely perfect; a being who cannot be surpassed in greatness.
2. The greatest conceivable being cannot simply exist contingently, for there is a greater being that would have necessary existence.
3. If God is the greatest conceivable being then he must have necessary existence.
4. A logically necessary being is one whose non-existence is inconceivable.
5. Therefore, if God has necessary existence then God's non-existence is inconceivable. Therefore God must exist.

The Argument by Alvin Plantinga

Definitions:

(a) Maximal excellence - the property of having omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection with respect to a possible world.

(b) Maximal greatness - the property of having maximal excellence in every possible world.

- 1) There is a possible world in which maximal greatness is instantiated.
- 2) Necessarily, a being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every possible world.
- 3) Necessarily, a being has maximal excellence in every possible world only if it has omnipotence, omniscience and moral perfection in every possible world.
- 4) Maximal excellence is instantiated in every possible world.
- 5) Therefore, in the actual world there is a being that is omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect.

Gaunilo, a contemporary of Anselm, had two major criticisms of the ontological argument.

First: If by "God" we do mean "that than greater which can not be conceived," then the concept is meaningless for us. We cannot understand, in any meaningful way, what exactly is meant by such words. The reality behind the term is completely transcendent to the human knower.

Second: Even if we grant that the concept of God as "that than greater which cannot be conceived" exists in the understanding, there is no reason to believe that the concept necessitates the extra-mental reality of God. After all, I can imagine the most perfect island, glorious in every detail, but there is nothing about my understanding of the island that forces us to admit the island exists.

Aquinas, 1225 - 1274 built his objection to the ontological argument on epistemological grounds.

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. It is a branch of philosophy that seeks to answer such questions as: What is knowledge? What is truth? How does knowing occur? Aquinas followed **Aristotle** in asserting: *"Nothing is in the intellect which was not first in the senses."*

Within Aquinas' empiricism, we cannot reason or infer the existence of God from a studying of the definition of God. We can know God only indirectly, through our experiencing of God as Cause to that which we experience in the natural world.

Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804), offered what many believe to be a damning critique of Anselm's ontological argument. Kant does not agree with Anselm's treatment of existence as a predicate. Kant pointed out that existence is not a *predicate* of something. Existence is not a *characteristic* that something may have or lack (One cannot say "Put all the dogs that exist in one cage and all the dogs that do not exist in the other" but one can say "Put all the brown dogs in one cage and all the black dogs in another"). The concept of "unicorn" is not changed in any way if we claim that it is. Nor is the concept damaged if we claim that unicorns are not. According to Kant, "...we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing is." If existence is not a predicate, then Anselm's argument has not demonstrated any meaningful information. *"Existence is not a perfection, but that in the absence of which there are no perfections."*

David Hume in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* suggested that the problem with this idea is that nothing that exists can be logically necessary. He writes, *'Nothing is demonstrable unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction.'* In other words, we can all imagine that God exists and we can all imagine that God does not exist. If this is possible, then it is clear that God is not logically necessary.

Bertrand Russell argues that when we say 'Cows exist' what we are really saying is that the **concept** of 'cow' is instantiated whereas the concept of **unicorn** is not. In this, Russell follows **Frege** who argues that 'exists' tells us that a particular thing is instantiated or exists rather than being a predicate. To say that something exists is to say that the collection of features indicated by the predicate expression of that thing is realized or instantiated. Frege's famous example is:

'Tame tigers exist'

'Exists' here is not a predicate; it adds nothing to our knowledge of tigers. All it is saying is that the concept of 'tame tigers' is instantiated - i.e. there are tame tigers. By contrast:

'Tame tigers eat a lot'

does tell us something about tame tigers - 'eat a lot' does, therefore, function as a predicate.

J. N. Findlay uses the Ontological argument to DISPROVE God's existence. His argument can be unpacked as follows:

1. God must be a necessarily existent being as anything less than a necessarily existent being is not worthy of worship.
2. Necessary statements about existence cannot be true (as Hume and Kant maintained) as necessity only applies to the way words are used - in other words to *de dicto* necessary statements like 'spinsters are female'.
3. Therefore God cannot exist.