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"Explain The Various Forms of the Ontological Argument."

- a) There are a number of different ways to try and prove the existence of God. Most of these arguments have one thing in common, namely their starting points are based on experience; they are "A Posteriori," arguments. The Ontological argument, is totally different to all of these as it is an "A Priori," argument. Meaning that: It does not start from experience; it arrives at the existence of God by analysing God's essence; finally if the argument succeeds, unlike the other arguments, there is no longer any doubt that God exists.

The thing that this argument hinges on is what one understands by, "necessity." Once one has understood this concept then they can come to grips with the argument. On the other hand, if one fails to understand then they will not be able to appreciate the argument. The Ontological argument starts with the statement that God is necessary. The phrase that Anselm uses is "de dicto necessary," meaning that the definition of God makes him necessary. It claims that once we discover the meaning of God, it is logically absurd to suggest his non-existence.

The man who first suggested this argument was St Anselm (1033 -1109.) Unsurprisingly he starts this argument with a definition of God, defining him as "That than which nothing greater can be conceived," this being the definition he gave in the Proslogion. After defining what Anselm understood to be God he laid out an argument in a series of propositions, which proceed as follows. God is by definition something that than which nothing greater can be conceived. This definition is known to Atheists and Theists. It is one thing to exist in the mind alone and another to exist in reality and the mind. It is greater to exist in both than just in the mind. Therefore, God must exist both in the mind and in reality as if this was not the case we could conceive of something greater. In summary, what Anselm is saying is that God can be proved to exist merely by analysing what it means to be God.

Anselm developed a second form of this argument to show that God had a necessary existence, as it was impossible to think of him not existing, showing that God is eternal and has always been. He does this with the following series of premises. It is greater to be a necessary being (a being that cannot not be,) than a contingent being (a being that can cease to exist.) If God exists contingently, then a greater being could be imagined; one who cannot be conceived not to exist. This being would then be greater than God. God is therefore a necessary being.

Descartes (1596-1650) built on Anselm's idea to produce his own, slightly clearer, version of the argument. Descartes states that just as we cannot conceive of a triangle without having three angles, so we cannot conceive of God without him existing. He says that, whatever belongs to the essential nature of something cannot be denied to it. God's essence includes existence; therefore God must exist. After criticism made against Anselm's version of this argument, which I will discuss in part b, Descartes builds on his first set of premises. He says that, this argument applies only to something absolutely perfect and necessary. It therefore cannot be applied to anything else other than God. After Descartes published his version of the argument Kant, (1724 - 1804) published a critique of the theory. Because of Kant's philosophical influence at the time this really damaged the argument. It had not been discussed for many years, until recently different versions have given it a new life.

Norman Malcolm (1911-1990) developed his own version of this argument based on Anselm's second argument, having accepted that Anselm's first argument fails. Malcolm begins his version by stating that if God doesn't already exist, then he cannot come into existence; that would mean that he was limited, which by definition he is not. Also if God does exist then he cannot cease to exist. Therefore, God's existence is either impossible or it is necessary. He follows this point by stating that it is rational to suggest that God's existence could only be impossible if it was, self contradictory or

logically absurd. As it is neither of these things he concludes that God's existence is necessary

Alvin Plantinga (1932-present day) started at first by criticising the ontological argument. He said that Malcolm has only shown that God exists in some possible world but not necessarily the real world. However, after critiquing Malcolm's version he set out to reformulate Anselm's argument. He states that God exists in understanding but not in reality. Existence in reality is greater than existence in understanding alone. It is therefore conceivable that there is a being greater than the being than which nothing greater is possible. This is absurd and therefore we can conclude that, it is false that God exists in understanding and not in reality. It therefore logically follows that if he does exist in understanding he also exists in reality. As it is fairly clear that God does exist in understanding it is necessary for him to exist in reality. To overcome the difficulty of God existing in one world but not ours Plantinga develops the possible world's argument. He claims that there are many possible worlds. In some worlds we exist in others we do not. Plantinga's claim is that God as a being of "maximal greatness" must exist in all these worlds. However he also admits that there is a weakness in his position. He says that if a world has "no maximality" no being of maximal greatness, then this could be exemplified in every world.

- b) The Ontological argument appears to try and define a God into existence. Many Philosophers are critical of this claiming that you cannot define something into existence. Thomas Aquinas for example, rejects the argument because we do not have an agreed definition of the word God. He also points out that even if we could agree on a definition that does not make it correct. Therefore what Aquinas is saying is that no one can definitely define God, in order to do that someone would have to have experience as to what God was like.

Gaunilo also challenges Anselm with his lost Island argument. He said that by Anselm's logic, defining an Island than which none greater can be conceived, means that the Island must exist. However Anselm responds to this point saying that, only God has all perfections, it is necessary for him to exist

because otherwise he lacks the perfection of existence. Gaunilo believes that Anselm is calling God the greatest actual being but this isn't the case, Anselm is saying that God is the greatest possible being.

Hume also rejects the ontological argument claims that however much our concept of God contains, we must go outside our concept of it in order to determine whether it exists. Hume maintains that we cannot define something into existence no matter what that is, or how many perfections it might have. Bertrand Russell has a more fundamental criticism of the argument. He says that when we say something exists, what we are really saying is its concept is instantiated. Saying that something exists, according to Russell, adds nothing to our understanding of the thing, if something adds nothing to our understanding of the thing then it cannot be considered part of something's essence. Therefore, the existence of God is not necessary. However, I disagree with this argument. Using the example of money I will illustrate the point. The only difference between the idea of pounds and pounds themselves is that pounds have spending power in the real world. As this is the only way to differentiate between the two, this surely adds something to your understanding of a pound. Therefore logically existence is part of the pound's essence as without it, it would have no value in the real world.

So in summary does the argument succeed? I don't think it does, whilst a powerful argument that will hold sway for religious believers, as it gives them a good idea what the word god means, and what it is to talk of God; I maintain that one cannot define something into existence. How do we know that the definition is right? I tend to agree with Hume, no matter how much information we have on what something is, we need to go outside that definition, in order to definitively prove it exists.

By Tom Hadden