

Outline the ontological argument as presented by Anselm and Descartes.

In a very simple form, the ontological argument attempts to show that the very concept of God implies his reality. If a person can clearly conceive of a God, then he or she ought to be able to understand that God might exist. The argument seeks to prove the existence of God, from its very meaning and without a doubt, it is one of the most puzzling of the theistic arguments.

The argument does not contain any evidence, which makes it an *a priori* argument where no previous knowledge of the world is needed to understand it. The truth of an argument does not depend on experience, but on knowledge acquired independent of experience.

According to the Christian theologian, St Anselm of Canterbury (1033 - 1109) we can form the concept or idea of a being than which none greater can be conceived. He put his argument into 6 stages, which set out to prove his concept of God to exist in his book, Proslogion.

- A person can have the idea of a being than which none greater can be conceived.
- Suppose this being exists only as an idea in the mind.
- Existence in reality is greater than existence only in the mind.
- Therefore, we can conceive of a being that is greater than a being than which none greater can be conceived—that is, a being that also exists in reality.
- However, there can be no being greater than that which none greater can be conceived.
- Therefore, the being than which none greater can be conceived must also exist in reality

The argument is somewhat confusing, so further explanation is needed. Anselm understood God to be a being of which none could be greater, which is a fairly straightforward assumption. In his book he wrote, not only, that God was someone which none can be greater, but added that God was also a being “greater than can be conceived”. Anselm understood that we could never even comprehend God's greatness. He moved on to say that if we have this image of God in our mind, God therefore exists, in what he called, ‘the understanding’. Anselm's next point was to say that it is far better to exist in reality rather than the mind. Once again, this is straightforward. I would much rather have a bar of chocolate sat in front of me than just the *idea* of a chocolate bar in front of me. His next few points take a bit more explaining. Anselm said that if we can conceive of a being than which none can be greater conceived, surely if he was so magnificent, he would exist in reality *as well as* in the mind. Therefore God must exist in the mind, as well as in reality.

However, if the argument was just to prove God's existence, then all that would tell us is that God is like us. He exists. In the next stage of his argument, Anselm went on to demonstrate that God's existence is necessary. By this Anselm meant to the eternal and transcendent nature of God. This means for God to exist *outside* our space and time, but able to create and act *within* it. Anselm argued that if He did not exist this way, we would not exist either.

To suggest that God is necessary is to suggest that there is no possibility of him to not exist. To do this, Anselm suggested that we need to know more than that He simply exists inside and outside our minds. Anselm believed that this is something we *do* know:

- It can be conceived that something exists that cannot be thought *not* to exist.
- God must be such a thing if He is ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’

- This is because something that can be thought not to exist would be inferior to that which cannot.

Thus, Anselm felt that he has demonstrated not only existence of God, but also that His existence was necessary.

Rene Descartes lived at a time when beliefs about the world were changing. He was educated at a Jesuit collage when Religion and science were in conflict. Descartes was somewhat a radical of his time, as he thought and tried to demonstrate that you can have both science and religion. He believed that we can arrive at sure knowledge by reason and need not rely on our senses. He said that people are born with innate ideas, so we all have an idea of God, although we cannot encounter Him with our senses. Descartes created further points, which added to the cosmological argument.

He believed that our idea of God is that he is perfect, in this context it meant flawless or lacking any faults. Descartes also said that it is better to exist than to not exist, just like it is better to exist in reality and not only in the mind. Therefore, existence in reality is perfection. As the idea of a perfect being is an idea of a being, which exists in reality, the Perfect Being (God) exists in reality.

“The ontological argument is an a priori proof and, as such, cannot inform us about the real world” Explain and assess this claim.

An a priori argument is based on analytic propositions, by which knowledge is gained through logical reasoning – to deny the propositions would be a contradiction. The arguments are ones, which the truth of a proposition does not depend on experience, but on knowledge acquired, independent of experience. The ontological argument is considered to be a priori because of these very facts. No evidence is used, only ideas and assumptions.

An a posteriori argument is one in which the truth of a proposition may only be known to be true after empirical evidence has been used to prove the proposition true or false. The very fact that the ontological argument is a priori is why it is so confusing. Many philosophers who have criticised the argument have pointed this out, along with some other flaws in its premises.

One major criticism of the argument is the claim that the existence of something can be inferred merely from its definition is implausible to most people. Is there anything that must exist just because we can think of it?

Gaunilo of Marmoutier, opposed Anselm, and gave an instant response to Anselm's book, *Proslogion* 2. Gaunilo stated that the idea of someone having 'the most perfect island' described to them, then to be told that it exists *because* of its perfection, is absurd. This is a criticism of the way in which Anselm moves from his definition of God to his suggestions of God's existence. However, this critic is invalid, as Anselm never compared anything so material. Where Anselm speaks of 'that than which none can greater be conceived' Gaunilo occupies himself with the comparison between islands. An Island can always be bettered, for example, you can always add another tree or lagoon here or there. Islands are also contingent, they can go in and out of existence, God however, is always there and is out of our understanding of time, therefore continues to exist forever. In this light, Gaunilo's objection does not successfully refute Anselm's argument.

Immanuel Kant opposed Descartes' version of the argument. He argued that no bridge could be built from the world of ideas to the world of reality. He believed that existence was not a property essential to greatness or perfection. If something is perfect and has properties A, B and C, is it any more perfect if it has A, B, C *and* exists? Isn't it the same 'something' we are thinking of in both cases? The word existence is not an action word like growing, nor is it an attribute word like green. One can define a thing as one sees fit, but whether or not anything matches that definition *in reality* is another questions all together.

Kant also deals with Anselm's argument and states that 'existence is not a predicate'. This means that saying X exists tells you nothing about X. Kant believes that a predicate must give us information about X. The statement that X is, does not give us any clues at all. Kant maintained that when we have a specification of anything we have to go outside this specification to determine whether or not the thing exists.

Bertrand Russell, a twentieth-century philosopher, claims that Anselm uses the word 'exists' incorrectly. Existence cannot be a predicate, if it were, we would construct the following argument: Men exist, Santa Clause is a Man, therefore we can conclude that Santa Clause exists. This is a form of syllogism, a form of logical reasoning, which consists of two premises and a conclusion, however in this case, the argument's conclusion is incorrect.

Russell is saying that existence is not a property of things, but an *idea* of those things. He held that every meaningful statement must be true or false. He considered the

statement 'the present King of France is Bald.' This may be true or false, but it is of course impossible to determine either, since there isn't a present King of France. Russell argues that because the first part of the statement is false, the whole statement is false. There is no present king of France, therefore how can he be bald?

The Anti-realist view is that once you have come to understand what God means *to you*, then God *exists* for you. This brings us to how an atheist would tackle Anselm's and Descartes' version of the ontological argument. If they have no idea of God, they will not have an image of Him in the mind, therefore, He does not exist in their understanding. You have to have an image of God being Immanent, Transcendent, Omniscient and Omnipotent, then the argument will probably carry some meaning for you. However one must have an idea of God before they consider the argument for it to anchor any meaning. As we have no empirical evidence about the existence of God, and cannot communicate with Him as we know how to communicate with each other, the argument cannot inform us about the real world and who created it. The fact that the argument is of a priori proof is a major flaw to its credibility.