

The Ontological Argument

Examine the major features of the ontological argument. To what extent do the strengths overcome the weaknesses?

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The word ontological derives from the Greek word "ontos" which means "to do with being", thus forming the basis of the argument. St. Anselm was a Benedictine monk hence this argument was coming from a believer, a theistic stance which later we will see to be one of its downfalls.

The argument starts with a definition, 'God is that which nothing greater can be conceived'. Anselm states that everyone is aware of this definition, therefore if everyone understands God is the greatest being God must exist because if God was only in the mind He would not be the greatest being seeing as a being in the mind everybody will agree is far less than a being in reality. Therefore Anselm states, 'God cannot be conceived not to exist. God is that, than which nothing greater can be conceived not to exist is not God.' Also Anselm supported this by stating God everyone knows as being a necessary being – therefore he could not not exist seeing as a necessary being is uncaused. Therefore overall it could only be the fool to deny the existence of God.

Gaulino replied to Anselm on behalf of the fool. He said that if he imagined a perfect island that does not necessarily mean that that island now exists. Even if existence was in his mind a characteristic of the island. Anselm replied that because Gaulino had experienced islands he could not possibly imagine an ultimately perfect one seeing as there could always be one more tree or one less rock hence an island is 'intrinsic maximum' Also an island is within the realm of space and time – whereas God is not. Anything within this world can never be truly perfect because it is limited through the restrictions of our world such as science and nature.

Descartes also supported Anselm through putting forward a variation of the argument years later. He defined God as a 'supremely perfect being' and hence;

1. Because God is a supremely perfect being. He possesses all perfections.
2. This perfect state includes existence which is perfection in itself. Existence is a predicate of a perfect being.

Conclusion. Therefore God exists.

He strengthened this argument by stating God must exist in the same sense a triangle must have 3 sides. Seeing as the very definition of a triangle is a three sided shape hence the very definition of God is an all perfect being hence an all existing being. By just considering the definition you are justifying the existence of both the triangle and God.

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Along with Anselm he said that this concept cannot be used on a being within the realms of space and time because that being would then have limitations hence not fulfil the definition of perfection.

Conclusively God is perfect, there can only be 1 absolute perfect, this one being therefore has to be exempt of our world, have necessary existence and hence this is the definition of God. Therefore God must exist.

The ontological argument has been widely criticised. This argument starts with the assumption of God's existence. However as Kant stated 'if there is no triangle there isn't three sides'. In the same way if you reverse the ontological argument if there is no God there is no absolute perfection. You cannot prove the existence of a being starting from the assumption that that being exists.

In the argument existence is treated as a predicate. Russell pointed out this would mean that it was a quality or property in which case the argument would be far more plausible, however existence is not. You would not describe someone as existing in the same way you cannot just state that God exists. For example;

1. Men exist.
2. Santa Claus is a man.

Conclusion. Santa Claus exists.

This is a syllogism not a proof and hence you cannot define God into existence.

However on the other hand the argument, unlike the cosmological and the design argument is an a priori argument. It does not base the premises on experience. God is known to be beyond experience therefore a proof of his existence cannot be based on something you experience. Also experience is tainted. Everybody has an idea of God therefore because of human nature one will subconsciously adapt their experience to fit within the realms of the argument. However because the ontological is a priori and the premises and conclusion lies within logic it cannot be distorted. This is strength above the other arguments put forward for the existence of God.

Secondly the argument is based on language although this could be seen as a weakness seeing as language is based on the interpretation of words and hence interpretation can be flexible. On the other hand this is the same language used in secular situations as well and the argument uses words that are defined through non

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religious example. For example perfection doesn't necessarily have to be describing something religious.

This argument because of its properties is a very strong argument for example the fact it is a priori. Throughout the argument the theistic stance comes through. For a believer starting from the same position as Anselm this argument falls into place however for an unbeliever there are problems they cannot assume that God is perfect and hence exists, this itself is what needs to be proved. The argument has faults and gaps and hence the weaknesses do out weigh the strengths even though this is a very strong argument.