

The Ontological Argument – Critique

Proving the existence of God can be thought of as a philosophical holy grail; the question of the existence of a supremely perfect being has plagued philosophers throughout the centuries, some sought proof in the design of our universe, others in the apparent complexity of our world; all such proofs have relied on a posteriori observations of the world around us, making inductive leaps from the premises they present; the ontological argument, however, relies on thought alone, attempting to prove a priori the existence of God: once one has accepted the premises, the conclusion becomes self evident.

Anselm defines God as that than which no greater can be conceived, stating that even a fool can know of this concept; that is to say, even one who denies the existence of God, the fool, can admit to comprehending what God is thought to be, namely that than which no greater can be conceived; after this is accepted, Anselm moves to link existence to this definition. If we were to conceive of a being that than which no greater can be conceived, then this being would exist in our understanding; however if this being were to exist in reality, as well as in our understanding, it would surely be greater than the that than which no greater can be conceived that exists in our understanding alone; Anselm proposed that, to admit to understanding the concept of God, was to admit that God existed, for to understand the concept, that God is that than which no greater can be conceived, is to admit that God must exist to avoid contradiction: that is to say, for God to truly be that than which no greater can be conceived, he must exist in reality as well as in our understanding - as Anselm himself put it, *"Thus if that than which a greater cannot be conceived is in the understanding alone, then that than which a greater cannot be conceived is itself that than which a greater can be conceived. But surely this cannot be."*

The ontological argument presented by Anselm appears as if to be a trick, once we accept that God is that than which no greater can be conceived, we seem locked into accepting the conclusion Anselm draws; thus Anselm's argument is a priori deductive, unlike other existence arguments which appeal to inductive leaps from a posteriori observations, and as such we cannot deny it's conclusion, instead it is necessary to analyze the premises if we are to destroy the argument. It would be wise to point out, however, that Anselm's argument was most likely intended for theists: *"I do not attempt to understand so that i may believe, rather i believe so that i may understand"*, this raises many questions over the true intention of Anselm's argument; if he does not wish to prove the existence of God, rather he wishes to understand God, then surely his argument can offer no proof for the atheist. Ontological argument do not offer proof for the non believer, they are left unconvinced - it was Kant who first coined the term ontological argument, as he saw Descartes formulation as making an invalid leap from the epistemological to the ontological, therein lies the problem for atheists - ontological arguments attempt to deduce what is, from what is known, and to anyone who believes the concept of God is illogical, this can hardly be convincing.

Gaunilo, one of Anselm's contemporaries and himself a Christian, criticized the ontological argument; Gaunilo used the exact logic of Anselm's formulation, to compose a similar argument, but for the existence of a perfect island - he thus states the absurdity of what Anselm claims, that anything perfect must exist. This criticism points to the main fault of the ontological argument, that it attempts to "define" objects into existence, something which is evidently illogical; using Anselm's logic we could argue for the existence of the greatest horse, or the greatest apple, any object which we can conceive could have a perfect version of itself, which by the logic of Anselm's argument would exist, thus the argument is reduced to absurdity; However, we can argue that, although these objects would be perfect, they cannot be compared to god, as God is defined as that than which no greater can be conceived - We could name myriad objects, which within their own belonging would be perfect, however when subjected to other perfect objects, who is to decided which is greater, and therefore the greatest conceivable being? That is to say, for every perfect horse, or perfect apple, who is to decided which is greater, the perfect horse of the perfect apple? Thus, Anselm's argument remains; it can only apply to that than which no greater can be conceived, not to objects who may or may not be perfect within their own realms.

Anselm defines existing as greater than not existing, a premise which seems logical at first, however once we analyze the concept of existence, it can be seen that existence is not a true predicate of being - this was Kant's main criticism of the Ontological argument. Kant did not criticise Anselm, although he may have had access to his work, he instead attacked Descartes formulation of the argument. Descartes, in the midst of doubting all he knew, famously reaching the conclusion "Cogito ergo sum", thought that if he could know of God, he could work forward to true knowledge - he thus came to a formation of the ontological argument. Descartes version remains similar to Anselm's, as all ontological arguments do, however his definitions differ somewhat; Descartes defines God not as that than which no greater can be conceived, but rather as a supremely perfect being, moving then to attribute existence to being a perfection, thus, his argument can be outlined by the following:

God can be thought of as a supremely perfect being.
A supremely perfect being possesses all perfections.
Existence is a perfection.
Therefore God exists.

Descartes offered an analogy, with regards to his argument, in that Gods relationship with existence can be thought of as a Triangles relationship with its angles; that is to say, just as a triangle cannot be thought of as such if it does not possess 3 sides, neither can God be thought of as God if he does not exist; Kant offered 2 criticisms of the ontological argument provided by Descartes, his first relates mainly to the analogy above: we may agree that, for God to truly be God, he must exist, however this does not prove in any such way that God must exist, it merely states that if God is to exist, he must possess existence. It is true that we can conceive of a God as existing, within our understanding, but not admit to that God existing in reality; simply attributing existence as a necessary component of a concept, does not make it so that this object exists in reality. Kant's first objection, therefore, offers the same complaint as Gaunilo, that objects cannot be defined into existence - It is true that a triangle must possess those 3 sides to be a triangle, in the same way God must possess existence to be God, however this does not stop us from denying that the triangle would exist, and in a similar manner we can deny of God existing (Although Gaunilo does not offer this directly, it is implied within his perfect island parody). We can see, therefore, that Descartes offers no proof for those who would deny the existence of God, but merely affirms those who already believe, or offers a rational basis for belief. To defend the ontological argument of this criticism, one must look to Anselm's Monologium.

The Monologium, which precedes the Proslogium, can be thought of as Anselm's true proof for the existence of God, the ontological argument is merely an affirmation of the conclusions brought about by the Monologium. Inside the Monologium, Anselm's appeals to the platonic forms, in that he invites us to sort 5 men, in order of their justice, asking by what could be the mechanism which we would all arrive at the same order; Anselm's claims that all goods are judged through a supreme good, which relates strongly to the platonic concept of the forms, and that such a supreme good can only be thought of as God. If we are to take this to be Anselm's main proof, the criticisms offered against the ontological argument seem irrelevant, as it was not meant to persuade in any form, rather affirm the conclusions that Anselm had drawn.

However, as most offer ontological arguments as true proofs for the existence of God, we must take them to be as such, thus Kant's criticism remains applicable - We cannot offer any argument that refutes Kant, it is true that ontological arguments make an invalid leap from the epistemological to the ontological; ontological arguments offer no a posteriori evidence for the existence of God, it would thus be logical to assume that they can never offer definitive proof to the existence of God - This is true, of course, unless one accepts a platonic idea of knowledge, in which we share common concepts of God; it would be wholly viable, should such an idea hold true, that we would share the idea of God as a common truth, presented to us by our souls previous knowledge of the forms; thus the idea of God, that he is that than which no greater can be conceived, could be thought of as a common truth, and any conclusions drawn from this concept could be held as truth.

However, even if we were to take a platonic view of the world, we would still have to deny Kant's second criticism.

Kant argued that existence, in the form which Descartes presented it, was not a true predicate to anything; Kant maintained that, for something to be a true predicate, it must change our perception of the object it refers to: a valid predicate to a book may be hard backed, it changes the way we perceive the book, our concept changes due to the nature of the predicate; however, if we were to say the hard back book exists, nothing changes, that is to say the concept of the book remains exactly the same, existence changes nothing of the nature of the object. Kant proposes that Descartes formulation of the ontological argument is flawed, in that he attains existence as a property which a being may possess as a predicate; in his critique of pure reason, Kant describes existence as adding nothing to our concept of an object, "100 imagined Thalers are worth no more than 100 real Thalers", if we take this as truth, then Descartes formulation becomes wholly invalid, as the main premise, that of existence being a supreme perfection, is invalidated. Of course, one could debate this issue, in that an imagined coin lies only in the imagination, where as a real coin can be used for buying objects, so in this way, perhaps existence does add properties to an object; however, we are still unable to qualify existence, in the way we may qualify other predicates: to say "some cows exist", makes no logical sense, whereas to say "some cows are black", although perhaps not correct, is atleast logical; thus Kant argues that, as existence is not a valid predicate, Descartes formulation of the ontological argument fails.

Anselms argument appears to suffer the same fate as that of Descartes, once we apply Kants criticisms, in that as existence changes nothing of the properties of an object, an existing object can be said to be no greater than a non existing one; however, Kants premise is debatable, or at least is seems to defy reason, that a non existing object be no different from an existing one, in that one may ask which would we rather have: real happiness, or imagined happiness? One could argue that, for any number of people, all would prefer real happiness, and when asked why, would reply that it is real. For that to be true, for us to make a rational decision between 2 objects, there must be a difference between them, or it would simply fall to the laws of probability to decide; however Kant makes a strong point, one that is difficult to refute, in that we cannot quantify existence in any meaningful sense, and as such it cannot be deemed a predicate – One must decide for oneself which is the correct sense of existence, as there can be no a posteriori rationale to persuade.

Russel sought to confirm Kant's theory on the nature of existence, with regard to subject predicate relations, and did so through analysis of language; in a similar manner to Kant, Russel imagined that any object can be qualified with myriad terms, the black cow for instance can be qualified by stating that there are some black cows, however to say something exists, leaves no room for qualification; re affirming Kant's criticism, such notions do irrevocable damage to the ontological argument – Both Anselm and Descartes's arguments hinger on existence being a property one can assign to God.

Ontological arguments are also subject to many parodies, the first being Gaunilo's perfect island, and as such can be thrown into the realms of absurdity; a serious flaw is the apparent jump from definition, that is to say the imaginary, to what exists in reality; for instance, it can be said an ontological argument for God not existing:

To create our world is the most supreme achievement
God is the greatest conceivable being
To create whilst not existing, is greater than to create whilst existing
Thus, to create our world whilst not existing would be the greatest achievement
Therefore, as God is the greatest conceivable being, God must not exist.

Obviously, there are many flaws in this argument; for instance, why is it that our world is the greatest achievement, why not multiple world?; however the parody remains, and it would seem that the ontological argument presented by Anselm and Descartes could be used for means they

did not intend. Such parodies cast serious doubt on the validity of ontological arguments; if we can use the same logic, and apply it to situations for which it was not intended, and deem them incorrect, then why should other formulations, in particular those of Anselm and Descartes, be said to hold truth?

In summation; it can be seen through both Kant and Russel's criticisms, that for the ontological argument to succeed, one must accept existence as a true predicate, if one does not, the ontological argument fails. However, if one accepts existence as a predicate, many more difficulties arise, not least the seemingly illogical leap from epistemological to the ontological; we can thus infer that, for atheist at least, the ontological argument fails – Perhaps the only true argument to persuade stern atheist would be direct a posteriori knowledge. If we view the ontological argument, as scholars of the monologium suggest, as an affirmation of platonic arguments presented by Anselm, then it becomes less so an argument, but more an affirmation – Perhaps this is the true purpose of the ontological argument, to allow a rationale basis of faith for the theist; if this is true, then all criticisms become less damaging, it is harder to dissuade men the persuade them; indeed, those who are not convinced by the ontological argument, if they are theist, are not often turned to atheism, and in such sense the argument can be seen to succeed.

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