The Ontological Argument

By Andy Caldwell

Salt Lake Community College

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Abstract

This paper will reproduce, examine, and explain St. Anselm of Canterbury’s ontological argument for the existence of the monotheistic God. It will then provide various critiques to the ontological argument provided from other philosophical minds, such as the 11th century monk Gaunilo, and the 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant in attempting to answer and refute St. Anselm’s main argument. It then will provide the author’s personal view on the ontological argument, such as the argument’s strengths and weaknesses.
The Ontological Argument Explained

The ontological argument for the existence of a monotheistic God was first put forth by St. Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm was the Archbishop of Canterbury who lived from 1033-1109 A.D. St. Anselm sought out to prove God’s existence strictly through Reason and Rationalism alone. Anselm’s intention in the design of the ontological argument was to construct a simple argument that would prove the existence of God, and that would be irrefutable.

Before explaining the specifics of Anselm’s main argument, let us first consider some context into what Anselm was trying to achieve with his formulation. Anselm felt that most everyone should be able to understand an argument for God’s existence with relative ease. The ontological argument was meant to be convincing to the average person of the time, and was also intended to convert the beliefs of the non-believers. We can see Anselm’s intentions toward those that did not believe in a God, or some higher power, as excerpted from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, where Anselm writes, “The Psalmist, however, tells us that “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’ ” (Psalm 14:1; 53:1). Is it possible to convince the fool that he is wrong? It is. All we need is the characterization of God as “that than which nothing greater can be thought.” The fool does at least understand that definition.” (Williams, 2000 May 18) What Anselm is saying is that if anyone can conceive of some ultimate power, then they by no means could deny the existence of God. This was the main intent of Anselm and his ontological argument.

In fundamentally describing the ontological argument, it states, if we can envision in our minds, a being that is perfect in every respect, omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, immutable, and impassible – which are the characteristics of the classical theistic God, then that
God would also have exist in the material world, or in physical reality. If we can conceptualize this perfect being in every respect, the only way that this being could then be any more perfect, is that it would also have to exist in material reality. Not just within the mind alone. Otherwise, if this being did not exist in material reality, then it wouldn’t be perfect, and we would have a contradiction on our hands. So St. Anselm takes the leap and comes to the conclusion that God does, and would in fact, have to exist. Anselm analogizes his thinking with the example of a painter to illuminate this. Anselm would say, imagine a painter that has an image in his mind, or a conception, of a painting that he would like to paint. At first this understanding of the painting can exist in the painter’s mind only, not in the physical world. However, the only way that the painting can be greater than the perfect conception that the painter has in his mind would be for this painting to also exist in reality. The painter first knows the conception in his mind, and then Anselm would claim, that the painter would then know its existence because he had thereafter painted it.

Below is Anselm’s full argument excerpted in standard form:

1. Persons have the idea of a greatest possible being.
2. Suppose the greatest possible being exists only as an idea in the mind.
3. Existence in reality is greater for something than existence only in the mind.
4. Therefore, we can conceive of a being greater than the greatest possible being – that is, a being that also exists in reality.
5. But there can be no being greater than the greatest possible being.

∴ The greatest possible being exists in reality. (Peterson M. 2013)
In going through each premise individually we can examine St. Anselm’s reasoning. Premise one simply states that a person can envisage a “greatest possible being.” This would principally mean, if true, that we could conceptualize in our minds what a God would be. This would include his qualities, attributes, and any other defining features. Premise two next would have us imagine that this being could only exist within the confines of our thoughts, not outside in any material reality. In this premise, this being could exist as an abstraction or conception exclusively. Premise two is important because it sets us up for the next premise, premise three. Three states that something that exists in material reality is greater than that of something that only exists in thought alone. A good example of this is money; where money that exists in reality is greater than just the sole thought of money. To illustrate this, take for example, money that we can spend and invest within physical reality, most would agree, is greater than just the thought of money within the limitations of our imaginations that we cannot use. Therefore, material existence is greater than an imaginary existence or conception. Next, Premise four says that if we can conceive of a perfect being such as God, then a God that would exist in the material world would also be greater than that of a God that could only exist within the confines of our thoughts solely. Premise Five says that there can be no greater than the greatest possible. Well, if the perfect God that we imagine doesn’t exist in material reality, only in thought, then according to St. Anselm, this would be a contradiction. For the being to truly be perfect, in every respect, its existence would thereby have to be assured, or guaranteed, to exist in physical reality as well. The final conclusion would be that God therefore exists.

In reviewing the description of the fore-mentioned argument, we can also get a sense of Anselm’s epistemological mindset in the formulation of the ontological argument. Where it is
apparent that his faith played a major role in his thinking, he wrote in his main work, The
*Proslogian*, “For I do not seek to understand in order to believe; I believe in order to understand.
For I also believe that ‘Unless I believe, I shall not understand.” (Hopkins, 2000) According to
the *Proslogian*, He already had believed in God before he had tried to prove God’s existence
through rationalism and argument. He did not come to God through the discovery of the
argument. It is probable that if Anselm did not believe in God beforehand, he most likely would
not have formulated the argument and come to the conclusion of God’s existence through
rationalism by itself.

**Objections to the Ontological Argument**

There are various critiques and objections to the ontological argument. One of which is
the 11th century monk Gaunilo’s. Gaunilo raises the objection that just having the thought of
something within your consciousness by no way guarantees its existence within physical reality.
Gaunilo also uses Anselm’s fore-mentioned *painter* example to respond to the ontological
argument. Where Gaunilo says in entertaining Anselm’s idea, “But first of all, if this were true,
there would be no difference in this case between having the thing in the understanding at one
time and then later understanding that the thing exists, as there is in the case of a painting, which
exists first in the mind of the painter and then in the finished work.” (Peterson, 2014) What
Gaunilo is doing is separating *conception* in the mind from *existence* in physical reality in a
sequential order.

Gaunilo next replaces the perfect being of God, in Anselm’s argument, by substituting in
a perfect island. What Gaunilo attempts to do with this is reduce Anselm’s argument to a
reductio ad absurdum. Gaunilo says that he can conceive of a perfect island, but that in no way guarantees that this island would therefore actually exist in reality outside of thought. One would first have to physically discover this island, its location, and all its attributes, to get a true conception of the island in their mind, and therefore, be able to fully understand or comprehend this island. What he is claiming is that we cannot fully understand and comprehend something like a God, or a perfect island, unless we empirically experience it with the senses first. Therefore, this would be an attack on Anselm’s first premise; where Gaunilo would hold that we cannot fully conceive of a perfect being, or a God. Therefore Gaunilo would claim that the ontological argument does not prove the existence of God.

The 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant also objects to St. Anselm’s ontological argument. Kant says that you cannot use existence as a predicate. This translates to the assertion that you can’t use existence as a descriptive quality that a person, place, or thing possesses, such as you can with features like color, shape, temperature, size, etc. This would also mean that God could not possess the quality of existence or non-existence as way of conceptualizing this being within our minds, and thus, if true, would render Anselm’s third premise false. Kant would say that existence adds nothing to the physical defining characteristics of a thing.

I have however seen from multiple sources, those that say that, existence and non-existence can be used as a predicate for the describing features of an entity, especially in the case of an abstraction or conception. I don’t know who originated this first, so I don’t know who to properly attribute it to, but there is an example out there of a discussion between an adult and a child. The adult is describing the features and qualities of the fictional Disney cartoon character, Mickey Mouse, to a child. The child then asks the adult if Mickey Mouse is real. We know that the child really doesn’t mean “real” in the sense of Mickey Mouse only existing within the mind
alone. The child wants to know if Mickey Mouse exists in physical reality. In this case, any responsible parent or adult would use existence as a predicate and say that Mickey Mouse does not in fact exist in the material world as a defining feature. This would counteract Kant’s critique of Anselm’s argument, where existence could be used as a defining feature to add to an explanation.

**Reflection on the Ontological Argument**

My own thoughts on St. Anselm’s ontological argument are, that I think he is taking too big of a step in going from the conceptualization of a being, to making the claim of pronouncing this being as existing without any other explanatory grounds, premises, or evidence for its existence. I would side with the monk Gaunilo in saying that you would never fully be able to conceptualize a perfect being in the first place. Where even if you could in fact conceptualize this being, you would still have the responsibility of explaining the exact mechanics of how its existence is tied with your own consciousness. Required is more than the sole use of what seems like to me, a *slight of hand trick*, in proclaiming a contradiction if this being does not exist based on the relative greatness or perfection of its existence or non-existence. I would say that there would have to be a fallacy somewhere in the chain of reasoning, and it is most probable that the fallacy would be contained in the first premise, which would render the rest of the argument impotent anyway. I can see where this argument could be convincing to the religious, if they were looking for reasoning to supplement their faith. If however, you would require faith and reasoning to complement one another, the rationalism could not stand on its own. I would say that there are too many problems with the ontological argument. I think that the argument was
confusing two different things together, that are not necessarily dependent on one another. I will say that thought is dependent on existence, but existence is not dependent upon thought. I would assert that existence and thought are really separate from one another, insofar as the use of proclaiming the existence of an entity based solely on the conception of the entity. Anselm took too big of a step in stating the existence of God. I likewise can see why this would be unconvincing to a lot of thinkers. I would say that we need more or better evidence for the existence of God, and St. Anselm’s ontological argument falls too far short as convincing.
References


