

Defense of the Ontological Argument

The ontological argument is a brief, yet cogent defense for the existence of God based solely on the concept of this omnipotent being. First formulated by St. Anselm in his *Proslogion*, and later supplemented by philosophers such as Descartes and Leibnitz, it is the only a priori argument for the existence of God: not based on past experience. With no empirical premises, and a conclusion arrived at by reason alone, no question or doubt can be placed on the argument's premises based on the uncertainties of human experience. In this paper, I will show that the ontological argument is not only valid, but also sound, and therefore does justify the belief in the existence of an omnipotent being, God.

The ontological argument is valid as God's existence is definitive assuming the argument's premises are true. The foundational premise of the ontological argument explains that within each human there exists an innate understanding of God, our creator, as "that which nothing greater can be thought of." Though it is possible to conceive of God in terms of his nature, all conceptions of God revolve around the characteristic of a most perfect being. The argument also contends that existence is a perfection, so something in existence is greater than the concept of that thing not in existence. Finally, since one can think of God as existing, and existence is inherently greater than not existing, God must exist for the foundational premise to hold. The validity of this argument is not difficult to prove and can actually be represented by simple inequalities: Existence > nonexistence (P2), so: Concept of existent God > concept of nonexistent God, therefore God exists given his definition (P1). As we will see, the vast majority of refutations of the ontological argument do not question its validity, but attempt to disprove its soundness by discrediting its premises.

There exists a concept of a being, call him God, that fits the description of "that which nothing greater can be thought of." There are two notable objections to this first premise, the first of which suggests that this perfect notion of God is not conceivable by the human mind. In this context, "conceive" means the act of clearly defining the essence (properties) of some entity. How can a human mind conceive of the omnipotent, perfect concept of God? In his third meditation, Descartes provides a starting point to answer this question: "the ideas in me are like pictures, or images which can easily fall short of the perfection of the things from which they are taken" (Descartes 2007, 352). Elaborating on this notion, it is evident that even concepts of basic entities can not be fully conceived. For example, try to conceive of a computer. You may think of a computer's essence in terms of its most notable features such as a glass display and a black keyboard. However, each of these features ("glass," "black," "keyboard," etc.) have their own ambiguous essences which makes it exponentially more difficult, if not impossible, to fully conceive of the entire object. Furthermore, your concept of a computer likely does not include its total essence, such as the layers of laminated copper that conduct electricity on the circuit board within the computer. In short, the ontological argument only requires a concept of God, and a concept of something does not need to contain all the essence of that "something." However, the ontological argument also requires that this concept be innate, that is, immutable. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas contends that "not everyone who hears this word 'God' understands it to signify something than which nothing greater can be thought, seeing that some have believed God to be a body" (Aquinas 1920, 23). A nifty way to get around Aquinas' objection is to strip the ontological argument of the word "God," rewording the first premise as "there exists a concept of a being that fits the description of 'that which nothing greater can be thought of.'" This way, the ontological still proves the existence of some perfect being, even though we may not give it a name.

A concept that exists outside of the mind is inherently greater than a concept which only exists within the mind. This premise, of which the final logical leap to God's existence is essential, has received a slew of criticism revolving around the ambiguous nature of existence and whether it makes something "greater." In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant attempts to discredit the ontological argument by explaining that existence "is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing" (Kant 1993, 504). In short, if existence is not a "predicate" (property), then the concept of something in existence can be no greater than the concept of that same thing not in existence as there is no difference in the content of the two. This is because, as Kant argues, only properties can change conceptualizations. I do not disagree with Kant that existence is not a property, and, nor is this explicitly stated in the ontological argument. Rather, I disagree with his hypothesis that a conception of something is the same whether it exists or not. To demonstrate this, I will start with a concept of President Donald Trump. We can conceptualize President Trump in terms of his properties: 6' 3", old, president of the United States, etc. Now let's say, President Trump suddenly dies and effectively no longer exists. Is a conception of the now nonexistent President different than my conception of him, if I have yet to hear the news?

Absolutely. While both conceptions still hold him as a political figure, with the same aforementioned physical properties, my concept of Trump includes his power to change my life through policy, diplomacy, etc., while the other conception does not. Returning to the ontological argument, how can we have a concept of an omnipotent God that does not include existence? If

God is nonexistent, then not only is he not omnipotent, he has no power at all as he has no bearing on the existent entities of our reality. If I, a theist, and a nontheist both conceptualize God to be our creator in which "nothing greater can be thought of," but the nontheist does not believe in the existence of God as he/she refutes the ontological argument, our concepts of God

are inherently different. On one hand, I conceptualize God as having the power to impact my life, but the nontheist does not. This not only explains why existence can change a conception, but why existence makes a conception, particularly that of a being, "greater." Existent beings are conscious, have free will, and therefore can use these abilities to alter reality.

The ontological argument can not be used to prove the existence of anything defined as "perfect." Though he does not attempt to discredit any particular premise of the ontological argument, in his *On Behalf of the Fool*, monk Gaunilo of Marmoutier claims that he can use the same logic of the ontological argument to prove the existence of an obviously non-existent, perfect island. While it has been addressed by many ontological defenders, I will present my own rebuttal of Gaunilo's objection so as to cover all bases in my defense of the ontological argument. Gaunilo states that there exists, in the mind, a conception of a perfect island, a piland, such that no greater island can exist. However, since one can think of a piland as existing, and since existence is a perfection according to the ontological argument, the island of a piland must exist (Gaunilo 1965, 2). Though it may seem damning at first, Gaunilo's construction is a sophism for two reasons. For one thing, as previously stated, existence is only inseparable from "that which nothing greater can be thought of," our definition of God. This definition implies singularity, that is, only one entity can meet this criteria. Therefore, our conception of this omnipotent being is greater than our conception of a piland, and so existence is not inseparable from the island. Secondly, attempting to attribute total perfection to an inanimate object is inherently problematic as one could easily take the concept of a piland, and continuously add more size, food, etc. to make it even more "perfect." In short, the perfection of God, a being, is based on his omnipotence, omnibenevolence, omniscience, all of which have limits, while the attributes which make a piland perfect do not.

In conclusion, the ontological argument is sound and therefore provides rational justification for the existence of God. Under scrutiny from renowned philosophers such as Kant, Aquinas, and Gaunilo, the premises of the argument hold and lead to the conclusion of God's existence. However, ironically, I admit there will still be times when I question his existence, be it as a result of some internal or external life crisis. Furthermore, I do not expect that every, if any, nontheist who reads this paper will immediately achieve faith in God even if they agree with my logic. How do we account for this apparent paradox without discrediting the soundness of the ontological argument? The answer lies in the nature of religion and faith. To have a relationship with our loving God, the purpose of religion, you must place your trust in him, as you place your trust in others whom you love. In this sense, faith is beyond reason, therefore reason, as provided by the ontological argument, is neither required for faith nor a guarantor of it. Just like the conception of God must be discovered, one's faith in God also must be found within.

Bibliography:

Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, 1272, literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, London: Burn, Oates & Washbourne, 1920.

Descartes, René. "God and the Idea of Perfection." *Western Philosophy*, by John Cottingham, 2nd ed., Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

Gaunilo, "On Behalf of the Fool", in *St. Anselm's Proslogion*, M. Charlesworth (ed.), Oxford: OUP, 1965.

Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1787, second edition, translated by N. Kemp-Smith, London: Macmillan, 1933.