

The Ontological Argument, first proposed by *Saint Anselm of Canterbury*, attempted to prove the existence of God through a series of *a priori* arguments. This is done by starting with a definition of God, which then employs hypotheticals to reason into existence. The sequence is as follows, starting with said stipulative definition of God:

- 1.) "God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived."
- 2.) God exists in the understanding. (You can imagine God in your mind.)
- 3.) That which is in existence is greater than that in imagination
- 4.) So, a real God would be far greater than a God made up in your head.
- 5.) Contradiction emerges; the God in your imagination is not a being in which nothing greater can be conceived. (Since there must be a greater being that exists in reality)
- 6.) Therefore, God must exist in reality.

It most certainly feels tricky. The argument is logically valid in form, and its reliance on purely deductive reasoning rather than empirical evidence makes it impossible for one to rationally reject the conclusion that is unavoidable once all premises are accepted. Despite its apparent potency, Anselm's Ontological Argument has been subject to criticism. The most influential comes from *Immanuel Kant*, which I will try to explain shortly before moving on to my own.

Kant's critique: Kant targets premise three, which reads "that which is in existence is greater than that in imagination." At first glance, this premise may seem intuitive: A million dollars in your bank account would be far more appealing than simply imagining a million dollars. Anselm uses existence as a predicate, being, something that adds information to a concept. (an apple is red > red being the predicate). According to Kant, to say something exists does not describe what it is like. Rather, it merely affirms that the concept is instantiated in reality. Let's take it back to our previous example with the money. The concept of a million dollars remains unchanged. The only difference is that the million dollars is now instantiated in reality rather than in your head. Nothing about the content of the subject changes when you say it exists. Now let's circle back to the original argument: Since Anselm is treating existence as a great-making property, the premise becomes invalid if one does not accept that existence is a property at all.

Now that's out of the way, I'm going to focus my attention on Thomas Aquinas and his (brief) critique of the Ontological Argument.

Aquinas wrote: "Perhaps 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." I'll use this observation as a starting point to further scrutinize the human

conceptual limits that invariably cause the conclusion of the Ontological Argument to result as delusive. Important to note though, for the purpose of this analysis, Kant's objection concerning existence as a predicate will be set aside (and any other semantic issues regarding existence), as it is not directly relevant to the critique that follows.

The central nuance arises between the first premise and how it takes the course of the premises that follow. While it is true that you could define God as a being in which nothing greater can be conceived (as there would be nothing fallacious in the definition's essence), would it logically follow, then, that you actually understand what that means? Does it then also follow that God is a being in which nothing greater can be conceived as subject to human conception? The inferential sequence constrains you to draw a simple semantic grasp of God, which is then subtly shifted into conceptual understanding later on in the series. This is observable in the second premise: When we are told that God exists in the understanding, this presupposes that one forms a coherent concept of God from what was initially a merely definitional one. Therefore, if God is a being in which nothing greater can be conceived, it does not logically follow that the same God in full essence would exist in the understanding. Now, pay attention to the subtlety: Anselm does not claim a full, coherent understanding of God is required for this series to work. Instead, it's structured as such:

Idea of God (in the understanding) → God existing in reality

Crucially, there is no avowal that a full understanding of God's essence is a prerequisite for inferring God's existence. However, this omission is precisely what undermines the subsequent conjecture. Having a concept of God—as subject to human conceivability in the understanding—does not instantiate God's existence in reality. Rather, at most, the original tenuous idea of God would be greater if instantiated.

Why?

As we know, Anselm is reasoning God's existence entirely through one's understanding; however, to move from conception to existence requires identicality of subjects. Premise two does not work if the two are not identical. Idea x existing in the mind cannot instantiate being y in reality. The argument, once identity is assumed, does not preserve maximal greatness nor the nature of God, so it cannot, in any way, instantiate God in reality. Maximal greatness is indispensable in Anselm's line of reasoning. (or else we could use the same logic to reason the greatest unicorn into existence) When you boil down God to a concept or an idea, then that maximality is lost. Consequently, all you have left here is an attenuated conception of God that got instantiated into reality—which contradicts the original definition of God. You cannot reason something you can not even comprehend (maximal greatness) fully into existence based on an original, weak formation of said subject. Evidently, lowering the standard of conception before employing it as such to conclude existence as if from a basis of strong conception, even from reading the very sentence, results in absurdity.

What follows doesn't really add anything significant to the original argument. I just want to share some thoughts and takeaways.

I think the Ontological Argument is genuinely an enjoyable and interesting thinking exercise; it's definitely unique compared to the other arguments for God's existence, which is what influenced me enough to even write this. I'm aware that there are more contemporary views regarding the original Ontological Argument that incorporate modal logic, where objections regarding existence and whatnot can be woven around through possible worlds, which I think, if I'm ever up for it, will also be something fun to write about.

The most important takeaway here is probably that God is outside human comprehension and is not to be limited.

References:

<https://www.newadvent.org/summa/1002.htm>

<https://iep.utm.edu/anselm-ontolo>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ontological-arguments/>