

Further Arguments for God's Existence

The Ontological Argument

Ontological arguments for God's existence try to deduce God's existence from the very concept of God. Just as being male is part of the concept of a bachelor and being a figure is part of the concept of a square, some philosophers have claimed that existing is part of the concept of God. If existing is part of the concept of God, then it is impossible to entertain the concept of God while at the same time denying that he exists. It would be like trying to entertain the idea of a bachelor that is not male, or of a square which is not a shape.

We will be studying a version of the argument from St. Anselm who was writing in the 11th Century. The argument, then, is nearly 1000 years old. Its age is noteworthy for three reasons. First, many have found the argument convincing. They think that Anselm's argument is both valid and sound. Second, many Atheists have thought the argument powerful and in need of a strong objection. Third, the argument is short, but sophisticated and incredibly challenging: many have found the challenge of studying it rewarding in itself just as they might find working on a challenging crossword puzzle a reward in itself. Take this third point as a word of caution. You won't get this argument immediately. It takes several attempts and significant mental gymnastics.

Let me introduce the core idea by way of analogy. Think about a cube. In your mind, what features does that cube have? It has specific size, color, 8 points, and 6 sides. Now holding the image of the cube fixed in your mind, increase its size. Now decrease its size. Now change its color. All of this is easy. You can do it. Now try holding the image fixed in your mind and change the number of sides it has. Try it. Make the cube have just 3 sides. This, of course, is an absurd request. A cube must have 6 sides; you can never imagine a cube with less or more.

St. Anselm claims that if we clearly entertain the idea of God, if we properly identify the features that imagined figure has, then we will discover that existence is a feature that we cannot imagine God to fail to have; just as we cannot imagine a cube without 6 sides, Anselm claims that we cannot imagine a non-existent God. Anselm will move on from this claim to show that it is in principle impossible to deny that God exists: since denying that God exists requires that we entertain the idea of God, and since we cannot imagine a non-existent God, we cannot coherently at the same time think about God and deny that he exists.

While the argument is difficult, at the core is the following simple thought: the Theist's belief in God is a belief both that God is the greatest being that exists and also that existing is one of the things that makes something great. When the Atheist denies that God exists, they cannot be denying that this greatest being exists; in their mind the image of God they form is of a non-existent being, which is an image of a less than perfect being. It's as if, on the one hand, the Theist claims both that unicorns have horns and they exist, and, on the other hand, the Atheist claims that unicorns have no horns and don't exist. The image of a unicorn in the mind of the Atheist differs from the image of a unicorn in the mind of the Theist. So, when one claims that unicorns exist and the other denies it, they are not in disagreement. They are talking about different things altogether.

Summary of argument

1. Assume that God exists only as an idea in the mind.
2. God is a being than which none greater can be imagined (that is, the greatest possible being that can be imagined).
3. A being that exists as an idea in the mind and in reality is, other things being equal, greater than a being that exists only as an idea in the mind.
4. Thus, a being greater than God can be imagined, namely, a being that is like God in every way but also exists in reality. (From 1&3)
5. God is and is not the greatest possible being that can be imagined. (From 2&4)
6. Therefore, God exists, i.e., our assumption in Premise 1 is false (From 5)

Notes on the argument

This type of argument is called a *reductio ad absurdum*. Recall that a valid argument cannot have true premises and a false conclusion. This is useful. If an argument is valid and the conclusion false, we know that a premise is false. Consider this example:

- P1. Socrates is immortal.
- P2. Socrates is human.
- P3. All humans are mortal.
- P4. Therefore, Socrates is mortal. (from P2 and P3)
- P5 Therefore, Socrates is mortal and immortal. (from P4 and P5)

We know that P5 is false. It is impossible for something to be both mortal and immortal. Since P5 is false, and since it follows from earlier premises, one of those earlier premises must be false. Many will likely conclude that the culprit was our first assumption:

- C. It is not the case that Socrates is immortal, i.e., P1 is false.

The Ontological Argument works in a similar way. We first assume that God does not exist in reality, but only in the mind. We then show that this ultimately leads to an impossible result, namely, that God is and is not the greatest possible being that can be imagined. Since that impossible result follows on from earlier premises, we know that one of the earlier premises must be false. The Theist claims that the mistake was Premise 1, which says that God exists only as an idea in the mind. Premise 1 is the core claim of Atheism. Atheists accept that they can form an idea of God, but they deny that anything in reality corresponds to this idea. Since the argument is valid and the conclusion false, at least one premise must also be false. But why think that the fault is premise 1? The answer: the other premises seem true.

- Premise 2 is the Theist's stipulation. Their belief in God is a belief in the greatest possible being. If the Atheist were to deny this premise, they would, in effect, be shifting the terms of the debate. Why? By "God", the Theist means an absolutely unsurpassable being, a being that cannot conceivably be improved upon. If being knowledgeable is a good feature to have, then God, the greatest possible being, will be perfectly knowledgeable, more knowledgeable than any other being. The same goes for being good, being powerful, etc. Belief in God just is a belief, then, in a being that cannot be improved upon. If the Atheist denies Premise 2, then we are not denying the existence of a being that the Theist believes in.
- Premise 3 says that existing is a feature something can have and also that existing is a good feature to have. Compare this to the claim that being strong is a feature and also a good one to have. When we imagine God, then, we should imagine a being that possesses all the great making features, existing in reality being one of these features. Premise 3 is the most controversial premise. See the textbook for further discussion.
- Premise 4 follows from Premises 1&3. If God does not exist in reality, but existing in reality is great making feature, then we can easily imagine a being that is greater than God.
- Premise 5 follows from Premises 2&4. It cannot be true both that God is the greatest possible being we can imagine and also that we can imagine a greater possible being.
- 6 states our conclusion. It may not be obvious how 6 follows from the premises. The core idea is that it is impossible for you to imagine that God does not exist. If you try, then you will be involved in the contradiction stated in 5.

The Cosmological Argument

- [Video: Part 1](#)
- [Video: Part 2](#)