

The Ontological Argument

by Stephen Chapman

Truly there is a God, although the fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.

- St. Anselm

The ontological argument is thought by many to be among the most venerable philosophical arguments of all time. The original argument, despite having first been put to paper almost one millennia ago, is still debated fiercely at all levels of philosophical thought, be they academic or merely amateur. This essay will explain the argument, and then question it on a fundamental level – does it work?

To begin, we must explain the argument in its entirety. The ontological argument exists to prove the existence of God using nothing but *a priori* reasoning. In other words, it attempts to prove the existence of God without physical evidence, using only thought and logic. It has been argued by many that it is not intended to be used to prove the existence of God to a non-believer, merely to reenforce the beliefs of those who already believe. This is suggested because in the work of the original author, St. Anselm, he prefaces his work with the words “[f]or I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand”. What he states, in effect, is that he already believes, and he merely used the argument to reenforce this belief. Therefore, the ontological argument does not rely on physical evidence to prove the existence of God, it merely uses the purest definition of the word God in order to create a situation in which God cannot fail to exist. The argument, as laid down by St. Anselm, reads as such: “God cannot be conceived to not exist, God is that which nothing greater can be conceived, that which can be conceived to not exist is not God”. To explain, because of the very definition of God that Anselm suggests, that of a being that is the greatest conceivable being, God must exist because a non-existent God would

not be the greatest conceivable. To simplify – to be the greatest conceivable being, the being in question must exist in order to be the greatest. A being that does not exist is not the best conceivable being. This is the basic ontological argument.

This argument is simple in its brilliance – it doesn't rely on physical proof or particularly difficult definitions. It merely takes the purest idea of God and shows that this definition must exist. Because of this, this argument has remained on the forefront of the philosophical battleground that is religion. However, since Anselm wrote the argument, many well-known philosophers have rejected what he states. Indeed, in the time that Anselm was still alive, flaws in his argument were pointed out by another monk – Gaunilo. Gaunilo argued that the logic used by the ontological argument was flawed. He did this by using an example – that of an island, that for whatever reason could not be proven to exist. He asks the reader to imagine that this island is the greatest conceivable island imaginable, and from there his argument becomes clear. According to the logic used by St. Anselm, this island must exist because it is the greatest conceivable island imaginable. This is a flaw within the ontological argument in that it would allow the creation of almost anything. If one was to suggest the greatest conceivable cup of coffee, that cup of coffee must exist, regardless of the fact that there is no evidence to support this fact. However, a common criticism of Gaunilo's argument is that it deals with different terms. St. Anselm's argument deals with the greatest conceivable *thing*, and does not define what this thing could be. As pointed out by William Rowe, while it may be fair to say that no other island may be greater than this lost island, it is perfectly reasonable to accept that a non-island could be. (Rowe, 1975). While Gaunilo's argument seems to fail at defeating the ontological argument, it does at the very least point out a flaw in the logic.

A second argument that can be used against the ontological argument is one that is perhaps more difficult to refute. This argument uses similar logic to the original argument, and while it may be considered parody by some, it is still

valid. The argument was suggested by an Australian philosopher named Douglas Gasking. This argument, which was not suggested particularly seriously, is simplified as such: First, let us assume that the universe and, by extension, everything was created. The creation of the universe, therefore, is likely the greatest achievement imaginable. Because the merit of a creation is based on not only its value, but also upon the disability of its creator (for example, if the Mona Lisa had been painted by a blind man, it would be even more impressive) we can assume that the creator of the universe must have had a serious disability. The most serious disability that could face a Creator (or God) would be non-existence. Therefore, if we imagine that the universe is the creation of an existing creator, we can imagine a greater being, namely, one who created the universe despite the disability of non-existence. An existing God would not be the greatest being imaginable, as suggested by Anselm, because a greater conceivable being would be one who did not exist, yet still created the universe. Therefore, God does not exist. As shown, despite having been put forwards in jest, and despite the fundamental ridiculousness of it, it still points out a serious flaw in the ontological argument. It uses logic similar to the original argument, and manages to disprove it in a similar fashion. This argument, in effect, shows the flaws with the ontological argument – it does not manage to stand up to being inspected logically – a death knell for an argument based entirely on logic.

To conclude, while the ontological argument at first appears to be sound, it is attackable in many ways – two of which are detailed in this essay. Because of the nature of these attacks, it is difficult to remain in support of it. As it is, there is a general consensus among modern philosophers that the argument does not stand in its original form. Therefore, it would appear that this argument has not stood the test of time as well as some would claim. Despite this, however, it still remains an interesting footnote, if for no other reason than because of its age, and the length of time that it has survived.

Bibliography

St. Anselm, *Proslogion*, translated by Deane, S. N in *Anselm's Basic Writings*, (1962), Chicago:Open Court Publishing Company.

Gaunilo, *On Behalf of the Fool*, taken from Plantinga, A. (Editor) *The Ontological Argument*, (1968), London:Macmillan

Rowe, William L. *The Ontological Argument*. In Feinberg, Joel. *Reason and Responsibility*. 3rd Edition. (1975) Belmont: Dickenson Publishing Company

Grey, William, "Gasking's Proof" *Analysis*. pp. 368-370. (2000) Accessed on 8th October at <http://www.uq.edu.au/~pdwgrey/pubs/gasking.pdf>