

Ontological Argument

St. Anselm, *Proslogion*

Ganullo, “On Behalf of the Fool”

St. Anselm

- Anselm (1033-1109) was a monk and the Archbishop of Canterbury
- Proslogion (c. 1080)
- Originator of the Ontological argument
- Influential argument for the existence of God



Philosophy of Religion

- Philosophy of religion is concerned with general aspects of religion
 - Does God Exist?
 - Can science and religion be reconciled?
 - What is the relationship between God and morality?
 - Are miracles possible?
- Theology is concerned with more particular aspects of religion
 - what is the holy trinity?
 - what is grace?

3 Views on the Existence of God

- **Theism:** Knowledge that God exists
 - I have a good reason to believe God exists
- **Atheism:** Knowledge that God does not exist
 - I have a good reason to believe God does not exist
- **Agnosticism:** Don't know whether God exists
 - I don't have a good reason to believe that God exists or that God doesn't exist

The Pervasive Belief in God

- How US citizens classify themselves
 - ~84% Monotheistic Religions
 - ~75% Protestant, Catholic
 - ~7% Other Christian (e.g. Mormon)
 - 1.7% Jewish
 - 0.6% Muslim
 - ~1% Other Religions (E.g. Buddhism, Hinduism)
 - ~16% Unaffiliated (E.g. Atheists, Agnostics)

- Source: 2007 US Census (<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/09s0074.pdf>)

Significance of God's Existence

- If we can show that God exists, then some important features of human life are possible
- **Religious Practice:** church service, prayer, etc.
- **Morality:** morality =df what God commands (desires)
- **Meaningful Existence:** without God life lacks purpose.

Definition of God

- Must be have at least three characteristics:
 - All powerful (omnipotent)
 - All good (omnibenevolent)
 - All knowing (omniscient)
- Conception is common to Judaism, Islam and Christianity
 - The arguments for God we look at are those defended by these religions
- **Anselm's Definition:** God = the greatest conceivable being
 - No further good qualities could be added to God because he already has them

- Reductio *ad absurdum* (proof by contradiction): an argument which starts with an assumption, shows that the assumption leads to an absurd result, proving that the assumption is false
 - Assume $5+5=9$
 -
 - ...
 - contradiction
 - So, $5+5$ does not equal 9
- Proofs by contradiction are not based on empirical observation; they are **a priori**
- Proofs by contradiction give **certain** results: $5+5$ is not 9 with certainty

Text on Ontological Argument

- “Thus even the fool is convinced that something than which nothing greater can be conceived is in the understanding, since when he hears this, he understands it; and whatever is understood is in the understanding. And certainly that than which a greater cannot be conceived cannot be in the understanding alone. For if it is even in the understanding alone, it can be conceived to exist in reality also, which is greater. Thus if that than which a greater cannot be conceived is in the understanding alone, then that than which a greater cannot be conceived is itself that than which a greater can be conceived. But surely this cannot be. Thus without doubt something than which a greater cannot be conceived exists, both in the understanding and in reality.” (St. Anselm)

The Ontological Argument

1. God is, by definition, the greatest conceivable being.
2. Suppose God does not exist [Assumption]
 1. Then a being greater than God is conceivable: a being just like God AND it exists
 2. But then, it is conceivable for there to be a being greater than the greatest conceivable being
 3. But, 2.2 is a contradiction: you can't conceive of a being greater than the greatest conceivable being
3. So, assumption (2) must be false
4. Therefore, God necessarily exists

Simple Ontological Argument

1. God is the greatest conceivable being
2. So, God is a supremely perfect being
3. Existence is a perfection
4. So, God must exist

Gaunilo's Perfect Island Objection

- Parody of the argument
 1. Treasure Island is the greatest conceivable island
 2. So, treasure island is a supremely perfect island
 3. Existence is a perfection
 4. So, treasure island exists
- But, this is absurd. Perfect islands don't exist
- Gaunilo: there must be something wrong with the ontological argument. He does not say what exactly.



Objection to Gaunilo?

- What's a perfect island? One with beautiful palm trees, nice beaches? These properties sound subjective and so there doesn't seem to be *one* perfect island
- Conceiving of a perfect island is a matter of taste, one can think that Maui is the perfect island or the Galapagos – there is no objective quality which makes one better than another.
- God's characteristics are objective, and so, when we conceive of a perfect being we all have the same thing in mind.
- Thus, the two arguments are not relevantly similar – Gaunilo's parody does not work.

Objection: Existence is not a Property

- Reject premise 3: “Existence is a perfection”
- Premise 3 implies that ‘existence’ is a predicate which expresses a property
- Kant: existence is not a property
 - Things (expressed by nouns): United States, President Obama, piece of chalk
 - Properties (expressed by predicates): being famous, being human
 - Things have properties. E.g. Obama has the property of being famous
 - Existence is not a property, so it can’t be had by anything