

# The Ontological Argument

St. Anselm, excerpt from *Proslogion*

Ganuilo, except from “On Behalf of the Fool”

Kant, Immanuel, “The Impossibility of the Ontological Argument”

# 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



# Ontological Arguments

- A set of arguments that attempts to establish the existence of God by merely reflecting about the nature or being of God – hence, the *ontological* argument, which means pertaining to being
- All such arguments attempt to show that if we reflect on the nature of God closely enough, we will come to see that God has to exist. It is a pure a priori argument for the existence of God.

# Anselm's Definition of God

- A definition of God = that thing which none greater can be conceived
  - Variant: God is the greatest conceivable being
- What makes a thing greater?
  - Goodness – a person who becomes more good has become greater
  - Knowledge – a person with more knowledge is greater
  - Power – a person with more abilities is greater
- God is that being to which no further greatness can be added, whose greatness cannot be improved
- Although Anselm is not using the traditional definition of God i.e. an all good, all powerful, all knowing being, his definition should be seen as a variant of the traditional definition

# The Rough Idea and A Simple Thought Experiment

- Imagine a being that is plainly not perfect, say Homer Simpson. Note, we are starting with a fictional being that doesn't even exist.
- Now, add qualities to Homer that would make him a more perfect being. Make him more powerful, more knowledgeable, more good, etc..
- Is this the greatest conceivable being? Anselm: No!
- We can conceive of an even greater being, namely, one that is just like it, but also exists. Surely, a being that exists is greater than one that exists only in the mind
- But, now we have shown that the greatest conceivable being exists
- God is defined as the greatest conceivable being
- So, God has to exist

# 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

- Here is an attempt at an interpretation
- 1. God is, by definition, the greatest conceivable being.
- 2. Suppose God does not exist [Assumption]
  - 3. If [2], then a being greater than God is conceivable
    - i.e. a being that is just like God (omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent) AND it exist
  - 4. If [3], then it is conceivable for there to be a being greater than the greatest conceivable being
  - 5. But [4] is not logically possible i.e. It is a contradiction
- Hence, the assumption [2] must be false
- Therefore, God exists

- *Reductio ad absurdum* (proof by contradiction):
  - an argument which starts with an assumption, shows that the assumption leads to an absurd result (e.g. contradiction), thereby establishing that the assumption is false
- A priori argument; all the premises of the argument are known by reflection; we didn't have to do any empirical work at all
- The conclusion of the argument is certain; we know for certain that God exists

# Simple Ontological Argument

- It is difficult to make Aquinas' argument clear. So, we will work with a simplified version of the argument:
  - 1. God is the greatest conceivable being
  - 2. So, God is a supremely perfect being
  - 3. existence is a perfection
  - 4. Therefore, God must exist

- The argument does not work for any thing; we cannot, for example, establish that unicorns exist.
- 1. A unicorn is a horse with a horn on its head
- 2. Existence is a perfection
- 3. Therefore, unicorns exist
- Argument invalid: (3) does not follow from the premises. This is because unicorns are not perfect beings – so, the ontological argument only works for perfect things.
  
- Note: premise 2 does not mean that everything is perfect. Rather, it means that if a thing exists, it is more perfect than if it does not – existence makes something more perfect, just as being more moral makes something more perfect.

# Gaunilo's Perfect Island Objection

- We can construct an argument of a similar form to perfect islands exists
- 1. Treasure Island is the greatest conceivable island
- 2. So, Treasure Island is a supremely perfect island
- 3. existence is a perfection
- 4. therefore, Treasure Island exists
- But, this is absurd. We know there aren't any perfect islands
- Gaunilo: there must be something wrong with the ontological argument. However, Gaunilo does not say what exactly the problem is.



# 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.
- On the other hand, 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.

# Kant Objection:

- Kant raises an objection to the ontological argument that has endured, and he, unlike Gaunilo, *does* identify the problem
- Kant Uses the distinction between things and properties
  - Things (often expressed by nouns): United States, President Obama, this piece of chalk in front of me.
  - Properties (often expressed by predicates):
    - Properties belong to things, things have properties. E.g. Obama has the property of being famous
    - 'is a G-8 member' expresses the property *being a G-8 member*
    - 'is famous' expresses the property *being famous*

# Existence is not a Property

- The problem with the ontological argument: premise 3: “Existence is a perfection” is false.
  - Anselm says that ‘existence’ is a perfection, this implies that ‘existence’ is a predicate which expresses a property
  - Kant: existence is not a property; it is not the kind of thing properly expressed by a predicate

# Existence is not a Predicate

- Why does Kant think existence is not a property?
- A property, as we said, is something that a thing has, so ascribing a property to a thing adds something to the thing; a predicate must inform us about what the thing is
- But, saying ‘*X exists*’ tells us nothing about *X* - it doesn’t change your idea or conception of *X*, so ‘Existence’ is not a predicate

# Example: Bachelor

- Here are a number of predicates:
  - ‘is unmarried’
  - ‘is male’
  - ‘is not the Pope’
- Each of these predicates tells us something more about bachelors. If someone did not know what ‘bachelor’ meant, each of the predicates would get them a littler closer to understanding what the word means. E.g. ‘Bachelors are male’ tells us that bachelors have the property of being male
- However, saying ‘bachelors exist’ does not informs us at all about what bachelors are. If one did not know what ‘bachelor’ means, one would not be any further along if they knew that bachelors existed.
- This shows that ‘exist’ is not a predicate like the others, and it does not express a property

# Kant

- Kant wants to say that St. Anselm is using 'exist' in a confused way
- The problem is that he hasn't clarified the meaning of 'exist' precisely enough
- This move foreshadows similar strategies utilized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as part of *analytic* philosophy, a movement where analysis of language is central to philosophy
- Analytic philosophy uses precise tools, such as logic, to systematically express arguments and philosophically interesting words