

Stephen Grant On The Ontological Argument

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Introduction

The ontological argument is one of the three classic philosophical arguments which aims to prove the existence of God. Where it differs from the cosmological and teleological arguments is that it runs along the lines of pure reason, and demands no empirical evidence to support the premises. The thrust of the argument is that if we properly understand our concept of God and we are rational, then we must accept He exists. Although this argument enjoyed a revival in the twentieth century, my focus in this article will be to set out the two earliest and best-known versions of the argument, which are found in the work of Anselm and Descartes, as well as considering what are widely regard as the most challenging responses, those of Immanuel Kant and Gottlob Frege.

Anselm

St Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) offered the first version of the ontological argument in the second and third chapters of *Proslogion*.¹ The argument is presented as a response to the sceptical concerns of the Fool of *Psalms* 13 and 52 who doubts God's existence. Anselm begins by characterising God as 'something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought', and asks us to consider which is greater, an object which exists only as an idea or one which exists both as an idea and in reality. Anselm claims that even the Fool must accept that the second option is the correct one, because if we choose the first, we can always think of something greater - an idea which also has an instance in the real world. This is taken to be the classic statement of the argument, but Anselm amplified this initial account in *Proslogion* 3 where he states that not only must we think that God exists, but that we cannot think of Him not existing.

In other words, not only does He exist, but He necessarily exists, and it is this additional claim which provided the starting point from which the twentieth century versions of the argument proceeded. The first response to the argument came from Anselm's contemporary, the twelfth century monk Gaunilo of Marmoutiers.² Gaunilo offers a parallel argument which generates an absurd conclusion. He asks us to imagine the fabled 'Lost Island', which was said to be 'superior everywhere in abundance of riches to all those other lands that men now inhabit'.³ Gaunilo argues that as an island of such unparalleled beauty is clearly better if it exists than if it doesn't, and given that as soon as we come to understand that the idea of the best possible island must include its existing (for otherwise it wouldn't be as good), then we must conclude the Lost Island really does exist. He takes it that any argument which can be used to demonstrate the existence of mythical islands is absurd and asks us on the basis of this to reject Anselm's proof.

Anselm's defence against Gaunilo provides the ontological argument with a further refinement which we find more prominently in Descartes' version, and which gives the argument much of the specific content with which it is usually associated. He accepts that if the argument could be applied to an island then the island must exist,

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but flatly denies that the argument can be applied in this way. The reason for this is that the meaning of the concept 'island' does not entail that it must exist. As such, it is obvious that we can think of the Lost Island or any other such object as not existing in reality. But this just isn't the case with God. It is part of the meaning of our concept of God that He is eternal and that He did not come into existence at any point. In this respect, He differs from islands and everything else, in that He is the only being for whom it is impossible for us to think of Him as not existing once we have understood what He is. In thinking of God, we just have to think He exists, and this distinguishes Him from any other being or object.

Descartes

At this stage it is worth setting out the version of the argument found in 'Meditation 5' of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* by the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650).⁴ Descartes offers a more economical and rather more readable account of the argument, but one which proceeds from the same premises as those set out by Anselm. After characterising God as 'a supremely perfect being', the key points of his argument are captured in the following passage;

But when I concentrate more carefully, it is quite evident that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle, or that the idea of a mountain can be separated from the idea of a valley.

For Descartes, our idea of God is 'clear and distinct' - an idea which we cannot doubt, and which is held with the same certainty as our ideas in the fields of geometry or mathematics. The idea of God includes existence, just as the idea of a triangle includes having three angles, and just as we must think that any triangle has three angles as soon as we understand what the concept means, we must understand that God exists once we have understood the concept of God.

The parallel with Anselm is already clear. There is little or no practical distinction to be drawn between Anselm's definition of God as a being 'greater-than-which-nothing-can-be-thought', and Descartes's reference to the idea of 'a supremely perfect being'. Each believes that a clear understanding of the meaning of the concept 'God' will be sufficient for the rational agent to understand that God must be thought to exist, and each is also forced into the same sort of refinement to the argument which will create the opportunity for the devastating arguments which Kant was later to press against them. For like Anselm, Descartes was forced to defend himself against the *reductio* argument we saw from Gaunilo, and his response was also to argue that God's existence was necessary, and that He is the only being who has the property of necessary existence. Only by taking this path can Descartes avoid committing himself to the absurd claim that we can show how any object, if defined as being perfect or necessary, must be thought to exist.

Kant

There are two common reactions when one comes across the ontological argument. The first is that it is ingenious, and the second is that for all its ingenuity there must be something wrong with it. This second intuition is perhaps best captured in the slogan

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that one cannot simply define something into existence, and the most famous critique of the argument came from the man who gave it its name, the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724- 1804). Kant's criticism is part of one of the most influential texts in western philosophy, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, a work almost as famous for its technical difficulty as for its philosophical brilliance.

Kant offers a series of arguments which attack certain key premises. Descartes insisted that to say God necessarily exists was equivalent to saying that God has the property of necessary existence, which he took to be no different logically to saying God has the property of being omnipotent or omniscient. Descartes argued that 'we can take the word "property" to stand for any attribute, or for whatever can be predicated of a thing'.⁵ (To predicate simply means to say about a subject that it has a particular property, so that in the sentence 'the apple is red', 'the apple' is the subject, and 'is red' is the predicate which picks out the property of redness.) This means that just as the statement 'a triangle has three sides' must be true, it is claimed that 'God exists' must also be true. In each case, it is argued that this is because the predicate is contained in the subject - having three sides is part of being a triangle, and existing is part of being God.

It is here where Kant disagrees. He accepts that we can certainly have a *definition* which includes the notion that the object must be thought of as existing, but claims it is a separate question as to whether or not there really is an *object* whose non-existence is unthinkable. His first move is to question Descartes' analogy between the statement 'a triangle has three sides' and 'God exists', both of which would be true *a priori* if we accept the arguments of the fifth meditation. Kant asks us to distinguish between what he calls 'the unconditioned necessity of judgements' on the one hand and 'the absolute necessity of things' on the other. To put it more simply, it is one thing to say that we just have to think that a triangle has three sides - here we are talking solely in terms of the *concept* of a triangle - but quite another to say that we just have to think that there are triangles in the world, where we are talking about the existence of *real objects* called triangles. It is indeed a logical contradiction to say 'a triangle doesn't have three sides', but there is no *logical* contradiction in saying 'there are no triangles'.

Needless to say we cannot fall back on the strategy of pointing to actual triangles, in that we cannot have recourse to *a posteriori* evidence (based on experience) to support an argument which is said to be true *a priori* (based on reason alone).

Kant then goes on to offer two explanations of why there couldn't be a logical contradiction in denying the existence of any object - even of a supreme being. The first is that it is impossible for any logical contradiction to arise in such statements. If we take the example at the end of the previous paragraph, we say in the statement 'a triangle doesn't have three sides' that the triangle lacks a certain property - having three sides. We generate the contradiction because we have denied that the subject has a particular property which it must have in virtue of its meaning - part of the meaning of the concept triangle just is that it has three sides. But when we deny something exists, we don't deny the subject has a particular property, we get rid of the subject and all its properties, so there are no subject and predicate left between which any contradiction can arise. In Kant's own words, 'We have thus seen that if the predicate

of a judgement is rejected together with the subject, no internal contradiction can result, and that this holds no matter what the predicate may be'.⁶

Kant's second argument is one which has provoked considerable dispute, and remains a live issue in modern philosophical logic. He argues that existence is not a '*determining* predicate', by which he means that when we say something exists, we do nothing to enlarge on our understanding of the *concept* of that thing. In order to explain this, consider the following case. Imagine someone new to religious thought who thus far knows only that God is omniscient, and who then reads these three sentences: 'God is omnipotent.' 'God is omnibenevolent.' 'God is.' Kant claims that the first two statements would add something to the student's concept of what God is, but the third wouldn't. This is because the third sentence contains no predicate, and therefore cannot expand our understanding of the concept of God.

One response has simply been to dispute this conclusion. If we say something exists, does it not add to our understanding of that concept to know that there are objects in the real world to which the concept corresponds? But this does not really answer Kant's point. He does not argue that such statements provide us with no information about the concept, but rather that it does not add to the *meaning* of the concept. If we say something exists or something is, we are not expanding the list of predicates which we now know belong to the subject, we are saying that this subject with all its predicates corresponds to an object in the real world.

Frege

For Kant, the ontological argument was a futile attempt to think something into existence. He saw the argument as one which confused what is possible with what is actual, and one which simply could not deliver the intended result - 'we can no more extend our stock of (theoretical) insight by mere ideas, than a merchant can better his position by adding a few noughts to his cash account'.⁷ The strength of his arguments was such that for over two centuries there was little or no interest in defending the ontological argument, but this did not prevent the Austrian philosopher Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) from providing what he believed to be a superior demolition of it to that of his German predecessor.⁸

Frege argued that the problem with the argument comes to light more clearly when we compare the way in which we use the concept of existence with the way in which we use numbers. To begin with, let us consider the confusion he felt arose when we use numbers. When we say things such as 'I have red apples' and 'I have two apples', it looks as if 'red' and 'two' are playing the same role in their respective sentences - each looks as if it 'qualifies' the apples (gives us some information about them). That they do *not* play that same role can be seen from the fact that in the first sentence each apple is red, but in the second sentence each apple is not two. Frege argues that a standard predicate such as 'red' can tell us something about an *object* in the real world, but a number such as two can only tell us about a *concept*. This becomes clearer if we compare two further sentences, 'Venus has red moons' and 'Venus has 0 moons'. The redness is a property of the physical objects circling Venus, but this obviously cannot be the case with the zero in the second sentence as there aren't any objects of which it could be a property. According to Frege, the zero is a property not of any object, but of the concept 'moon of Venus'. To say 'there are 0 moons' is to

say that there are no objects which fall under this concept, just as to say 'I have two apples' is to say that there are two objects which fall under the concept 'my apples'.

Now, what has this talk of numbers to do with God's existence? The answer is that when we say something exists, we are effectively assigning a number to it - the number one. When we say God exists, we are claiming that there is one real object which falls under the concept God, and the problem for the ontological argument now becomes clear. Frege's response to anyone claiming that existence is part of the meaning of God would simply be that this proves absolutely nothing with regard to whether or not there is a real God. As existence is only ever a property of a concept then we still need to address the further question as to whether there is a real object which falls under the concept of a supreme being with necessary existence. And it is here where we find perhaps the most eloquent statement of why we can't define God into existence. Regardless of what the definition is, there will always be a further question as to whether our definition picks out a real object, and no matter how much necessity or existence we build into the definition, this further question will always remain.

Frege's central claim is that just as the language of numbers confuses us by giving the impression that 'two' and 'red' are used in a similar way, the language of existence produces the same mistake. We tend to assume that just as redness can be a property of a real object, existence can be too, and it is here where the mistake lies. Once the confusion is cleared up then one key premise of the ontological argument falls. According to Frege, we cannot know from the definition of God that there is a real God which has the property of existence, because no real object ever has this property.

Conclusion

It would be wrong to think that Kant and Frege had consigned the ontological argument to history. The question arises as to whether or not their views are as devastating to Anselm's version as they are to Descartes', and both Norman Malcolm and Alvin Plantinga have recently put forward more technical versions of the argument pitched in terms of modal logic. But the thought remains that it is unlikely that anyone who approaches the literature with a genuinely open mind is likely to feel convinced of God's existence based purely on these arguments. Regardless of the elegance of the logical proofs on offer, the intuition that the real existence of an object cannot be conclusively proved purely by considering a definition remains stubbornly in place.⁹

Stephen Grant

Richmond upon Thames College

¹ The key extracts from each of the first three primary texts to which I shall be referring here can be found in Brian Davies' *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000).

² *ibid*, 313-317.

³ *ibid*, 316.

⁴ *ibid*, 327. On The Ontological Argument *Richmond Journal of Philosophy* 3 (Spring 2003) Stephen Grant Page 6 of 6

⁵ *ibid*, 331.

⁶ *ibid*, 338.

⁷ *ibid*, 341.

⁸ See *The Frege Reader*, 102-103, ed. Michael Beaney (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1997).

⁹ Plantinga's account of the argument can be found in Brian Davies' *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, 342-353, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000). For Norman Malcolm's version, see his 'Anselm's Ontological Argument', in *Philosophical Review*, 69, (1960). An excellent, brief overview of all the material covered in this article as well as these last two arguments can be found in Chapter 4 of Brian Davies' *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993).