

Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 4, Theistic Arguments, Part 3, The Ontological Argument

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This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 4, Theistic Arguments, Part 3, The Ontological Argument.

Okay, so now we're going to turn our attention to another theistic argument known as the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God.

It was devised by Saint Anselm in the 11th century, and this argument is unique. It's an a priori argument. It's an argument for the existence of God, which does not appeal to anything in the sense of experience like the other arguments for the existence of God.

This one just begins with the concept of God as a perfect being, as a being that is the greatest being that we can conceive of, and according to Anselm and other defenders of the argument since, this can provide sufficient grounds for believing that such a being exists. Versions of the Ontological Argument have been defended by lots of other philosophers, from Rene Descartes to 20th-century philosophers such as Norman Malcolm, Charles Hartshorne, and Alvin Plantinga. We'll look at Anselm's original version of the argument or two versions of the argument that he devised, and then we'll look at Plantinga's modal version of the Ontological Argument as well.

So, Anselm was proven by mere reflection on the idea of God. It was something that he had a kind of intuition about long before he actually devised the argument itself, that such an argument should be possible. Eventually, he developed this argument, and it's presented in two different forms in his work called Proslogium.

So he begins with the idea, as he puts it, of that than which none greater can be conceived. A being than which nothing greater can be thought. So, let's call that being, G for short, a being than which none greater can be conceived.

The second premise of the argument is that what exists in reality, and not only in my mind, is greater than what exists only in my mind. After all, if somebody offered you these options to have a pizza that is just the thought of a pizza, a concept of, say, your favorite pizza, deep dish, pepperoni, sausage, or whatever you like on your pizza, but just the thought of it, as opposed to an actual pizza that was just

purchased at say Pizza Hut, which would you choose if you were really hungry? You're going to go with the actual pizza. Why? Because it's real.

The actual pizza is greater than the mere thought of the pizza, no matter how lofty your thoughts or dreams are of the ideal pizza. It's better to have the real thing, the reality. When you're talking about good things, the reality is always greater than a concept, which is a mere idea.

So, that which exists in reality is greater than that which exists only in one's mind. Now, if G, or that than which none greater can be thought, existed only in my mind, then it would not be that than which none greater can be thought because I can conceive that being, that greatest possible being, existing in reality and not just in my mind.

So the idea of God, or that than which none greater can be thought, must, we must be talking about a being that actually exists if we're thinking about if we're truly trying to conceive of a being that is the greatest conceivable being because it's greater to exist in reality than just in the mind than this being that I'm conceiving of, even if I'm an atheist or an agnostic. I have to admit, according to Anselm, that this being exists in reality as well if I'm really thinking consistently about a being than which none greater can be conceived.

So, in order to avoid a contradiction, I need to admit that this being exists in reality. It would be contradictory for me to say this is the greatest conceivable being, has all these perfections, and yet it doesn't exist. Because to exist is a perfection.

If I'm conceiving of this being consistent, I have to admit it exists in reality. Because to exist in reality is a perfection. It's a great making quality.

So, the conclusion is that that then which none greater can be conceived must exist in reality. God exists. He's proceeding with the assumption that God is that being then which none greater can be conceived.

So, that's the first version of the ontological argument. Now, he has another argument or another form of the ontological argument, that is a little bit different. It begins with the premise that it's possible to conceive of a being that cannot be conceived and not to exist.

Anselm would ask you, can you imagine a being whose non-existence is inconceivable? Or, as Wallace Sean in the great film The Princess Bride would say with his lateral lisp, it is inconceivable. It would be inconceivable to have a being whose non-existence is possible. If it's the greatest being, the greatest possible being would have to be such that its non-existence would be inconceivable.

Can you imagine such a being whose non-existence cannot be imagined? Anselm's assuming that, yeah, you can imagine that, a being whose non-existence is inconceivable. Well, the next question then is, does that being exist? Is there a being that answers to that description? Is a being whose non-existence is inconceivable? A being which cannot be conceived not to exist. Does that being exist in reality? Now, if you've already admitted that you can conceive of that being, then that is to say you believe it's possible.

Now the question is, do you believe it actually exists? If you say yes, then okay, well, then you've admitted theism is true. If you say no, you've contradicted yourself because you've just told me that you believe that a being whose non-existence is inconceivable does not exist, which means you're conceiving this being does not exist. You just told me that it's a being such that you cannot conceive of its non-existence, so you can't have it both ways.

If you're thinking about a being whose non-existence is inconceivable, then you have to say no, it must exist because I've just admitted that its non-existence is something that can't even be conceived. And if it can't be conceived, then it's not possible. So, this being, G, cannot be conceived as not existing; therefore, it must exist necessarily.

So this is a modal, so-called modal version of the argument because it has to do with the logical necessity that this being necessarily exists. It can not exist. So that's the other version of Anselm's argument, the so-called ontological argument. Anselm didn't name it; Kant named it in his Critique of Pure Reason, he also named the cosmological argument and the teleological argument, and he named this the ontological argument.

What are we to say to Anselm's argument or arguments? There was a contemporary of Anselm named Gaunilo who tried to rebut Anselm's argument, and in doing so, he used the analogy of the perfect island. I can imagine a perfect island with all the things that you want on a tropical island. You've got clear, clean water, a nice beach, you've got palm trees, just enough shade, you've got tropical fruits, coconuts, pineapples, and the temperature, say, mid to high 70s, maybe 80s, maybe partly cloudy every day, and lots of fellowship with wonderful people on the island.

We can go on and on about what a great island it is, but just because you can imagine this perfect island it doesn't follow from that that it actually exists. So, that's Gaunilo's complaint. Anselm's response basically says that his argument doesn't really work with particular kinds of beings.

It's only going to work if you're talking about that being than which nothing greater can be conceived because it's only there that you can get to the conclusion that it must have this additional great-making quality of existence. So, it only works for that

being which no greater can be thought. You can't apply it to particular things like islands, automobiles, or pizzas, but that is a bone of contention to this day.

Critics of the argument insist that, no, Gaunilo's right. There must be something wrong with the argument because it seems like you could potentially prove the existence of anything, unicorns or whatever, just by saying that I'm imagining the greatest version of that thing. So, there's one objection in Anselm's reply.

Another major objection to this argument comes from Kant many centuries later. This is probably the most cited critique of Anselm's argument, and it's Kant's complaint that existence is not a real predicate. It's not the sort of thing that we ascribe to something.

Rather, existence is presupposed whenever we predicate, whenever we say, describe, or ascribe qualities to things. So, if someone were to ask me to describe a clock on the wall in this particular room, I might say, well, it's a round-the-clock. It has symmetrically arranged Roman numerals on its face.

It's got a minute hand. It exists. It has a brown rim.

It's on the east wall. Those are pretty natural descriptions of the thing, except for one thing I said there when I added that it exists. That would seem awkward, right? Because we're taking for granted the existence of the clock that I've been asked to describe.

Whenever you're ascribing qualities to things, you're assuming that they exist from the outset. So, when we're talking about God, Kant maintains and describes God, a potential being, if you're agnostic, as being, say, omnipotent or omniscient, we are assuming it exists, if only for the sake of argument. It's not the sort of thing that you can add to the concept.

You're already assuming its existence. Now, a pushback to this criticism is that existence is not always assumed whenever we predicate of things. If I say that Dr. Doolittle loves animals, or Merlin is a magician, or Pegasus flies, unicorns have horns.

I'm not assuming these things exist. I am describing imaginary or fictional objects. So, existence can be a predicate, right? So, I may say that the unicorn has a horn, and actually, in this case, it really does exist.

I'm adding something to the concept there by talking about a unicorn that I claim is actually real. Why can't I do the same thing when it comes to God? So, Anselm, in his argument, has a couple of objections. In more recent times, we've seen some more sophisticated versions of the ontological argument defended by various philosophers.

In the 20th century, I mentioned Norman Malcolm. He has a version of the argument. Charles Hartshorne and a number of other process theologians have defended versions of the argument.

Alvin Plantinga has devised a modal version of the argument that's gotten a lot of attention and works with possible world analysis. It pivots on the concept of possible worlds and can be summarized like this. So, the first premise is a little bit of a simplification of his argument, but I think it captures the essence of his claim here.

The first premise is that there is a possible world in which a maximally great being exists. That is, a being that is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and so on. There's a possible world in which a maximally great being exists.

The second premise is that maximal greatness entails having maximal excellence in every possible world. So, to be a maximally great being, a being would have to not just have all of these qualities in certain possible worlds but would have to have them, would have to exist in a certain possible world, in a certain possible world, in all possible worlds. Not just some possible worlds.

So, if a maximally great being exists in some possible world, then this being exists in every possible world. Well, guess what? Our world is a possible world. The actual world is a possible world.

So, if a maximally great being exists in every possible world if it exists in some possible world, then a maximally great being must exist in this world. If it exists in all possible worlds, this is a possible world. The maximally great being must exist in this possible world.

Therefore, there exists a being who is maximally great, who is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and so on. So that's Plantinga's ontological argument. Clearly, the key premise here is that there is a possible world in which a maximally great being exists.

That is to say, it is possible that a maximally great being could exist in some possible world. Plantinga takes it as a fair assumption that in order to be a maximally great being, a being would have to exist in every possible world. But that first premise is the key one, that it is possible that there could be a maximally great being.

That has been a point of major contention when it comes to discussion of this argument among scholars. Kenneth Hema and others have challenged that first premise, that the concept of a maximally great being, they have argued, is incoherent. C.D. Broad has also brought this up; Jean-Paul Sartre and others have

tried to note certain contradictions between divine attributes or what is understood to be great-making qualities, such as between omnipotence and omniscience.

An omnipotent being could make a free being, presumably. Let's take that for granted. An omniscient being would know the past, present, and future states of all people that it made.

But then, in that case, it looks like even an omnipotent being couldn't make a free being if it was also omniscient because it would know all the future states that are going to happen or occur in the life of this being that tried to make free. If the future states and the future conditions of a particular being were known in advance, then that would arguably imply that it wasn't really a free being because its future states could not be known in advance if it was truly free. That kind of argument has been proposed by various philosophers to try to show that no being could be both omnipotent and omniscient.

You have incompatible divine attributes there. I don't find that particular argument convincing, for one thing, in that case, because I don't share that definition of freedom. Much will pivot or turn on your understanding of what free will is.

You would have to hold a particular view on freedom, a particular kind of libertarian view, in order for that argument to work. But who says that that particular view of freedom is correct? That tends to be a problem that plagues different versions of this kind of argument, attempting to show the incoherence of divine attributes, specifically omnipotence, and omniscience, and going back to Sartre, among other philosophers who've taken that route.

So, I would take the view that nobody has shown conclusively, decisively, that there is actual incoherence when it comes to these divine attributes, any of the divine attributes. I don't think that that has been proven. So, I happen to think that Planting's argument is very strong, stronger than Anselm's original argument.

But it certainly continues to be food for thought and the subject of a lot of debate in contemporary philosophy of religion, the ontological argument.

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