Dr. James S. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 4, Theistic Proofs, Part 3, Ontological Argument Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 4, Theistic Proofs, Part 3, Ontological Argument, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This excerpt from a philosophy of religion lecture by Dr. Jim Spiegel explores the **ontological argument for God's existence**, beginning with **Saint Anselm's 11th-century formulation**, which argues that the very concept of a perfect being necessitates its existence. The lecture then examines **Anselm's two versions** of the argument and **Kant's famous critique** that existence is not a predicate. Finally, it discusses **modern iterations of the ontological argument**, focusing on **Alvin Plantinga's modal version** and some philosophical challenges to the coherence of the concept of a maximally great being.

2. 14 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 4 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Theology \rightarrow Apologetics \rightarrow Philosophy of Religion).



Spiegel_PhilRel_Ses sion04.mp3

3. Briefing Document: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 4, Theistic Proofs, Part 3, Ontological Argument

Briefing Document: The Ontological Argument for the Existence of God

Executive Summary:

This document summarizes Dr. Jim Spiegel's lecture on the Ontological Argument for the existence of God, focusing on the historical development from Saint Anselm to Alvin Plantinga and key criticisms. The ontological argument is unique as an *a priori* argument, meaning it does not rely on sensory experience but begins with the concept of God. Spiegel outlines Anselm's two primary formulations, the classic and the modal, followed by a discussion of prominent objections from Gaunilo and Immanuel Kant, and finally, an explanation of Plantinga's modern modal version. Spiegel concludes by acknowledging the ongoing debate surrounding the argument but expresses his view that Plantinga's formulation is particularly strong.

Main Themes and Important Ideas/Facts:

1. Introduction to the Ontological Argument:

- The ontological argument is a theistic argument for the existence of God that is **a priori**, meaning it is based on reason and concepts rather than empirical evidence.
- It starts with the **concept of God as a perfect being**, specifically "that than which none greater can be conceived."
- The argument aims to show that the very definition of God necessitates his existence.
- Key historical figures who defended versions of the ontological argument include Saint Anselm (11th century), René Descartes, Norman Malcolm, Charles Hartshorne, and Alvin Plantinga.

2. Anselm's First Formulation (Classic Version):

- Anselm begins with the definition of God as "that than which none greater can be conceived" (often referred to as "G").
- The central premise is that "what exists in reality, and not only in my mind, is greater than what exists only in my mind." Spiegel uses the analogy of a desired pizza to illustrate this point: "After all, if somebody offered you these options to

have a pizza that is just the thought of a pizza... as opposed to an actual pizza... which would you choose if you were really hungry? You're going to go with the actual pizza. Why? Because it's real."

- If God (the greatest conceivable being) existed only in the mind, then a greater being could be conceived one that exists in reality.
- Therefore, to avoid contradiction, "that then which none greater can be conceived must exist in reality. God exists." Existence is presented as a "greatmaking quality" or a "perfection."

3. Anselm's Second Formulation (Modal Version):

- This version focuses on the inconceivability of God's non-existence.
- Anselm asks if one can conceive of a being whose non-existence is inconceivable.
- If such a being (whose non-existence cannot be imagined) is conceivable (i.e., possible), then the question is whether it exists in reality.
- To deny its real existence would be a contradiction because one has already conceded that its non-existence is inconceivable.
- Therefore, "this being, G, cannot be conceived as not existing; therefore, it must exist necessarily." This introduces the idea of God's necessary existence.

4. Objections to Anselm's Arguments:

- Gaunilo's Perfect Island Analogy: A contemporary of Anselm argued that if Anselm's logic were sound, one could prove the existence of a perfect island simply by conceiving of it as the greatest conceivable island. "I can imagine a perfect island with all the things that you want on a tropical island... but just because you can imagine this perfect island it doesn't follow from that that it actually exists."
- Anselm's response was that his argument "only works if you're talking about that being than which nothing greater can be conceived" and not for contingent beings like islands. This distinction remains a point of contention.
- Kant's Critique: Existence is not a Real Predicate: Kant argued that existence is not a property or attribute that can be added to the concept of a thing. "Rather, existence is presupposed whenever we predicate, whenever we say, describe, or ascribe qualities to things."

- Spiegel explains Kant's point with the example of describing a clock: adding "it exists" feels awkward because existence is already assumed.
- However, Spiegel notes a pushback to Kant, arguing that existence can be a
 predicate when discussing fictional entities: "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." The question then becomes why existence cannot
 be a predicate when considering God.

5. Plantinga's Modal Ontological Argument:

- Alvin Plantinga developed a more sophisticated modal version of the ontological argument using **possible world analysis.**
- **Premise 1:** "There is a possible world in which a maximally great being exists." A maximally great being is defined as one that is "omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and so on."
- **Premise 2:** "Maximal greatness entails having maximal excellence in every possible world." To be maximally great, a being must possess these perfections in all possible worlds, meaning it would necessarily exist.
- **Conclusion:** "Therefore, there exists a being who is maximally great, who is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and so on." If a maximally great being exists in any possible world, it must exist in all, including the actual world.
- Spiegel highlights that the key premise is the possibility of a maximally great being.

6. Challenges to Plantinga's Argument:

- The Coherence of Maximal Greatness: Critics like Kenneth Hema, C.D. Broad, and Jean-Paul Sartre have questioned whether the concept of a maximally great being is coherent. They argue that there might be contradictions between divine attributes, such as omnipotence and omniscience.
- Spiegel discusses the argument that an omniscient being knowing the future states of a being it creates would preclude that being's free will.
- Spiegel finds this specific argument unconvincing, as it depends on a particular "libertarian view" of free will.
- Spiegel concludes that "nobody has shown conclusively, decisively, that there is actual incoherence when it comes to these divine attributes."

7. Conclusion:

- Spiegel considers Plantinga's argument to be "very strong, stronger than Anselm's original argument."
- However, he acknowledges that the ontological argument, in its various forms, "certainly continues to be food for thought and the subject of a lot of debate in contemporary philosophy of religion."

Quotes:

- Anselm's definition of God: "that than which none greater can be conceived. A being than which nothing greater can be thought."
- Anselm's argument for existence being greater than mere conception: "what exists in reality, and not only in my mind, is greater than what exists only in my mind."
- **Gaunilo's objection:** "just because you can imagine this perfect island it doesn't follow from that that it actually exists."
- Kant's critique of existence as a predicate: "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..."
- **Plantinga's first premise:** "There is a possible world in which a maximally great being exists."
- **Plantinga's definition of maximal greatness:** "a being that is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and so on."

This briefing document provides a detailed overview of Dr. Spiegel's lecture on the ontological argument, highlighting its historical development, core principles, and major criticisms. It serves as a valuable resource for understanding this complex and enduring philosophical argument.

4. Study Guide: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 4, Theistic Proofs, Part 3, Ontological Argument

The Ontological Argument: A Study Guide

Key Concepts

- **A Priori Argument:** An argument whose justification does not depend on sensory experience but relies on reason and logic alone.
- **Ontological Argument:** An argument for the existence of God that begins with the definition or concept of God.
- **Saint Anselm:** An 11th-century philosopher and theologian who first formulated the ontological argument.
- "That than which none greater can be conceived": Anselm's definition of God, often abbreviated as "G."
- **Perfection:** A quality that enhances the greatness of a being. Existence is argued by Anselm to be a perfection.
- **Gaunilo's Perfect Island:** A criticism of Anselm's argument proposing that if the logic worked, one could prove the existence of a perfect island simply by conceiving of it.
- **Immanuel Kant:** An 18th-century philosopher who famously critiqued the ontological argument, arguing that "existence is not a real predicate."
- **Predicate:** A property or attribute ascribed to a subject.
- Norman Malcolm: A 20th-century philosopher who defended a version of the ontological argument.
- **Charles Hartshorne:** A 20th-century philosopher and process theologian who also defended a version of the argument.
- Alvin Plantinga: A 20th-century philosopher who developed a modal version of the ontological argument.
- Modal Logic: A branch of logic that deals with necessity and possibility.
- **Possible World:** A complete and consistent way the world could be.

- Maximally Great Being: A being that possesses maximal excellence (e.g., omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness) in every possible world.
- **Incoherence of Divine Attributes:** The argument that certain attributes ascribed to God (e.g., omnipotence and omniscience) are logically contradictory.

Quiz

- 1. Describe the fundamental characteristic that distinguishes the ontological argument from other theistic arguments like the cosmological or teleological arguments.
- 2. Explain Anselm's initial formulation of the ontological argument based on the concept of "that than which none greater can be conceived."
- 3. What is Gaunilo's perfect island objection to Anselm's argument, and what was Anselm's primary response to this criticism?
- 4. Summarize Immanuel Kant's critique of the ontological argument, focusing on his assertion that "existence is not a real predicate."
- 5. How do proponents of the ontological argument respond to Kant's critique, particularly by referencing examples of imaginary or fictional objects?
- 6. Briefly explain the core idea behind Alvin Plantinga's modal version of the ontological argument, highlighting the significance of "possible worlds."
- 7. According to Plantinga's argument, what is the relationship between a maximally great being existing in at least one possible world and its existence in the actual world?
- 8. What is the main point of contention surrounding the first premise of Plantinga's argument, that "there is a possible world in which a maximally great being exists"?
- 9. Describe the objection that argues for the "incoherence of divine attributes," using the example of omnipotence and omniscience provided in the source.
- 10. According to Dr. Spiegel, has the incoherence of divine attributes been conclusively proven? Briefly state his position on this matter.

Quiz Answer Key

- 1. The ontological argument is unique because it is an a priori argument, meaning it argues for God's existence based solely on reason and the concept of God, without appealing to sensory experience or observations of the world.
- Anselm argued that God is "that than which none greater can be conceived." He
 posited that a being existing in reality is greater than a being existing only in the
 mind. Therefore, if God only existed in the mind, a greater being could be
 conceived (one that also exists in reality), leading to a contradiction.
- 3. Gaunilo argued that if Anselm's logic were sound, we could prove the existence of a perfect island simply by conceiving of it as the greatest conceivable island. Anselm responded that his argument only applies to the unique concept of God as the absolutely greatest being, not to contingent or limited beings like islands.
- 4. Kant argued that existence is not a predicate, meaning it's not a property that can be added to the concept of something to make it greater. Instead, existence is a precondition for having any properties at all; we presuppose existence when we describe something.
- 5. Proponents argue that we do ascribe existence as a predicate when discussing things like fictional entities, for example, stating that "unicorns have horns" versus "a unicorn exists in this story." They question why existence cannot similarly be a predicate when considering the concept of God.
- 6. Plantinga's modal ontological argument uses the framework of possible worlds. It argues that if it is possible for a maximally great being (one with maximal excellence in every possible world) to exist in at least one possible world, then it must exist in all possible worlds, including the actual world.
- According to Plantinga, if a maximally great being exists in at least one possible world, its very nature entails that it possesses maximal excellence in every possible world. Since the actual world is a possible world, the maximally great being must necessarily exist in our world as well.
- 8. The main point of contention is whether the concept of a maximally great being is even coherent. Critics argue that the combination of attributes like omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness might be logically contradictory, making the possibility of such a being existing in any world questionable.

- 9. The objection regarding the incoherence of divine attributes suggests that certain attributes traditionally ascribed to God might be logically incompatible. For instance, the argument suggests that an omniscient being knowing all future actions might preclude the possibility of truly free beings created by an omnipotent being.
- 10. According to Dr. Spiegel, the incoherence of divine attributes has not been conclusively proven. He believes that the arguments attempting to demonstrate such incoherence often rely on specific and potentially debatable definitions, such as a particular view of free will.

Essay Format Questions

- 1. Critically analyze Anselm's ontological argument. What are its strengths and weaknesses, and how effectively does Gaunilo's perfect island objection challenge it?
- 2. Evaluate Immanuel Kant's critique that "existence is not a real predicate" in the context of the ontological argument. Is this a decisive objection, or can proponents of the argument offer persuasive counterarguments?
- 3. Explain Alvin Plantinga's modal ontological argument in detail. What are the key premises and concepts involved, and what are the main points of contention surrounding its validity?
- 4. Discuss the philosophical debate surrounding the coherence of divine attributes, using specific examples like the tension between omnipotence and omniscience. How does this debate impact the plausibility of ontological arguments?
- 5. Compare and contrast Anselm's original formulation of the ontological argument with Plantinga's modal version. In your opinion, which argument is more philosophically compelling, and why?

5. FAQs on Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 4, Theistic Proofs, Part 3, Ontological Argument, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions: The Ontological Argument for God's Existence

1. What is the ontological argument, and how does it differ from other theistic arguments?

The ontological argument, primarily associated with Saint Anselm, is a unique type of argument for God's existence. Unlike cosmological or teleological arguments that rely on sensory experience or observations of the natural world, the ontological argument is *a priori*. This means it aims to demonstrate God's existence through mere reflection on the concept of God itself, specifically as the greatest conceivable being or a maximally perfect being, without needing empirical evidence.

2. What are the core premises of Anselm's original ontological argument?

Anselm presented two main forms of the ontological argument. The first starts with the idea of God as "that than which none greater can be conceived." The argument proceeds by stating that something that exists in reality is greater than something that exists only in the mind. If God existed only in the mind, then we could conceive of a greater being, one that exists in reality. Therefore, to be truly "that than which none greater can be conceived," God must exist in reality. The second version focuses on the conceivability of God's non-existence. Anselm argued that we can conceive of a being whose non-existence is inconceivable. If such a being existed only contingently (i.e., it could possibly not exist), then it would not be the greatest conceivable being, as a necessarily existing being would be greater. Therefore, the greatest conceivable being must exist necessarily.

3. What was Gaunilo's "perfect island" objection to Anselm's argument, and how did Anselm respond?

Gaunilo, a contemporary of Anselm, objected to the ontological argument by proposing a parallel argument for the existence of a perfect island. He argued that if Anselm's logic were sound, one could imagine a perfect island with all desirable qualities, and by the same reasoning, conclude that this perfect island must exist in reality because a real perfect island would be greater than a merely conceptual one. Anselm responded that his argument only applies to the unique concept of God as the greatest conceivable being. The property of necessary existence, he argued, is intrinsic to the concept of a maximally great being in a way that it is not to the concept of a perfect island or other finite things.

4. What was Immanuel Kant's critique of the ontological argument, particularly his assertion that "existence is not a real predicate"?

Immanuel Kant offered a significant critique, arguing that "existence is not a real predicate." By this, he meant that existence is not a property or characteristic that can be added to the definition or concept of something in the same way that qualities like "being round" or "being powerful" can. Instead, Kant argued that existence is presupposed whenever we ascribe predicates to something. When we conceive of God as having certain perfections like omnipotence and omniscience, we are already assuming the possibility of God's existence in order to ascribe those attributes. Therefore, claiming that God must exist because existence is a perfection adds nothing to the concept of God itself; it merely affirms that the concept we are considering has an instance in reality, which cannot be proven by conceptual analysis alone.

5. How have contemporary philosophers like Alvin Plantinga reformulated the ontological argument, and what is the significance of "possible worlds" in these formulations?

Contemporary philosophers, such as Alvin Plantinga, have developed modal versions of the ontological argument that utilize the framework of possible worlds. Plantinga's argument posits that it is possible that a maximally great being exists in some possible world. A maximally great being is defined as one that possesses maximal excellence (like omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness) in every possible world. If such a being exists in even one possible world, then it must exist in all possible worlds, including the actual world. The key premise that is often debated is whether it is indeed possible for a maximally great being to exist, i.e., whether the concept of such a being is coherent.

6. What challenges or objections have been raised against these contemporary, modal versions of the ontological argument?

A primary challenge to Plantinga's modal ontological argument centers on the coherence of the concept of a maximally great being. Critics like Kenneth Hema and C.D. Broad argue that the very idea of a being possessing all maximal perfections might be logically contradictory. For example, some have argued for potential incompatibilities between attributes like omnipotence and omniscience. If a being knows all future states, can it truly create free beings whose actions are not predetermined? While proponents of the ontological argument often contest these claims of incoherence, the burden of proof regarding the possibility of a maximally great being remains a significant point of contention.

7. Why does Dr. Spiegel consider Plantinga's modal ontological argument to be stronger than Anselm's original formulation?

Dr. Spiegel indicates that he finds Plantinga's modal argument stronger than Anselm's original argument. While the specific reasons are not elaborated upon in extensive detail, the development of the argument within the framework of possible worlds allows for a more nuanced discussion of necessity and possibility. By focusing on whether it is *possible* for a maximally great being to exist and the implications of such possibility across all possible worlds, Plantinga's argument attempts to address some of the criticisms leveled against earlier versions, particularly regarding the nature of existence as a predicate.

8. Despite ongoing debate, why does the ontological argument continue to be a significant topic in the philosophy of religion?

Despite the various objections and criticisms it has faced, the ontological argument remains a significant topic in the philosophy of religion because it tackles a fundamental question about the nature of belief and the grounds for theistic claims. It forces us to consider the relationship between our concepts of God and the reality of God's existence. The argument's a priori nature offers a unique approach, distinct from arguments relying on empirical evidence, and continues to stimulate rigorous philosophical analysis regarding the nature of existence, possibility, necessity, and the very definition of God. Even if one is not convinced by the argument, engaging with it can lead to a deeper understanding of theistic and atheistic perspectives and the limits and possibilities of philosophical reasoning about ultimate reality.