

The Ontological Argument

What you need to know:

St Anselm's ontological argument.
Descartes' ontological argument.
Norman Malcolm's ontological argument.

Issues that may arise for the arguments above, including:
Gaunilo's 'perfect island' objection
Empiricist objections to a priori arguments for existence
Kant's objection based on existence not being a predicate.

Anselm's Ontological Argument

P1: God is a being that than which nothing greater can be conceived.

P2: Even an atheist ('the fool') can conceive of God as the greatest possible being (it is a coherent concept that exists in our understanding)

P3: It is greater to exist in the understanding and in reality rather than in the understanding alone.

C: Therefore, the greatest possible being, God, must exist both in the understanding and in reality.

Descartes' Ontological Argument

P1: I have the idea of God

P2: The idea of God is the idea of a supremely perfect being.

P3: A supremely perfect being would necessarily contain all the attributes of perfection.

P4: Existence is an attribute of perfection

C: Therefore, God must exist

Possible Exam Questions

In his ontological argument, how does Anselm define God? (3 marks)
In his ontological argument, how does Descartes define God? (3 marks)
Outline Anselm's version of the ontological argument. (5 marks)
Outline Descartes' version of the ontological argument. (5 marks)
Outline Malcolm's version of the ontological argument. (5 marks)
Outline Gaunilo's 'perfect island' objection (5 marks)
Outline empiricist objections to a priori arguments for existence. (5 marks)
Outline Kant's objection based on existence not being a predicate. (5 marks)

Combine any two of the above to make 12-mark questions e.g. Outline Anselm's version of the ontological argument and Gaunilo's 'perfect island' objection to it. (12 marks)

Compare and contrast Anselm's and Descartes' versions of the design argument. (12 marks)
Compare and contrast Descartes and Malcolm's versions of the design argument. (12 marks)
Compare and contrast Anselm's and Malcolm's versions of the design argument. (12 marks)

Does the ontological argument prove the existence of God? (25 marks)

Malcolm's Ontological Argument

P1: Either God's existence is:

- i. necessarily false
- ii. contingently false
- iii. contingently true
- iv. necessarily true

P2: If God is the greatest being that can be conceived, he cannot be either ii or iii because if God were contingent, he would be limited in some way. He would come in and out of existence.

P3: God cannot be i because there is nothing contradictory about the concept of God.

C: Therefore, by elimination, God is necessarily true.

The Ontological Argument

Gaunilo's Perfect Island Objection

Gaunilo explains that if a friend told him about the most perfect island, better than anywhere else in the world, he could image it.

If his friend said that the island would be even better if it was real rather than just in his imagination, then of course, according to Anselm ontology, the island must exist.

But is this true? Gaunilo states that just because a person can conceive of something, it doesn't make it exist.

Gaunilo argues that if Anselm's argument can be used to prove the existence of a non-existent island, then it is flawed!

Anselm's Response to Gaunilo

He makes two points:

1. You cannot possibly compare God with an island!

We know that islands have a beginning and a likely end because they are **contingent** – it can exist but need not exist.

An island does not have an eternal existence unlike God who is unique, eternal and **necessary**.

By definition, necessary things have to exist.

2. An island can never possess maximal properties

Does it have tasty fruit? It could always have a bit more.

Is the scenery nice? It could always be a little bit nicer.

God is fundamentally different because the properties he is supposed to possess are maximal properties.

Key terms

Necessary: A condition that must occur. It cannot not happen

Contingent: A condition that may or may not occur. It could happen, but it might not.

Predicate: a property of something

Kant's Objection to the Ontological Argument

P1: A genuine predicate adds to our conception of a subject, and helps to determine it.

P2: 'Existence' does not add to our conception of a subject or help to determine it.

C: Therefore, existence is not a genuine predicate.

Kant gave the example of coins. An imaginary pile of coins is exactly the same as a real one. Adding more coins doesn't increase the number of coins!

Hume Objection to the Ontological Argument

Hume argues that we can have knowledge of just two sorts of things:
the relations between ideas (later called a priori or analytic)
matters of fact (later called a posteriori or synthetic)

P1: A Relation of Ideas exists where its denial entails a contradiction.

P2: Nothing that can be distinctly conceived entails a contradiction. For any being that we can conceive of as existent, we can also distinctly conceive of that being as non-existent.

C: Therefore, there isn't any being whose non-existence entails a contradiction.

As a result, ontological arguments based on the idea that God is necessary, must fail, as no being is necessary.

