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1 Introduction

1.1 Armchairs

Ontological arguments are arguments for the existence of God. What makes them distinct is that they are supposed to be *armchair* proofs. The premises are all supposed to be

- knowable *a priori*: knowable independently of any particular empirical observations, or
- analytically true: true in virtue of definitions and concepts, or
- necessarily true: true no matter how the world might have differed.

Or *something* like that. The terms are hard and counterexamples loom.

Contrast cosmological and design arguments for the existence of God. For example:

- Some cosmological arguments try to show that God exists on the premise that the universe began to exist, and so must have a supernatural cause (see Craig 2018).
- Some design arguments try to show that God exists on the premise that the laws of nature are finely tuned to allow for life (see Collins 2018).

These are not armchair proofs. Their premises appeal to detailed empirical evidence about the beginning of the universe or the fine-tuning of natural laws. They are much more hostage to scientific discovery than ontological arguments are. But, from the slightest premises, ontological arguments try to get us to the most sublime conclusion.

Graham Oppy prefers to define ontological arguments in terms of their historical descent from the original ontological argument of Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109): “what is distinctive of ontological arguments is that their formulation has the right kind of connection to Anselm’s argument” (2018: 11). True enough, though we might imagine something worth calling an *ontological argument* that is historically divorced from Anselm – one of the arguments covered in this Element (in Section 5) might count as such.

Maybe the best we can do is to classify ontological arguments by a kind of family resemblance between them. At least, I cannot give a more precise definition or general description of ontological arguments. But that will not matter to the presentation and evaluation of what have traditionally been classified as ontological arguments.

1.2 God

Ontological arguments try to prove that there is a greatest conceivable being or a greatest possible being or a perfect being – or *something* like that. And then such a being is supposed to turn out to be

- omnipotent: all-powerful,
- omniscient: all-knowing, and
- omnibenevolent: all-good.

Or *something* like that. For the most part, this is what we mean by *God* in what follows. The scriptures and traditions of different religions often point towards such a being, even if they do not explicitly mention omnipotence, omniscience, or omnibenevolence; the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions are full of awesome praise of the power, knowledge, and goodness of God. The conclusion of ontological arguments is then usually religiously robust: it gives us a quite detailed picture of God that fits with religious traditions (though a more modest ontological argument is treated in Section 5).

Contrast, again, cosmological and design arguments. They are usually supposed to show one or other divine attribute – that there is a first cause or an intelligent designer – but not the perfect package of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. However, some arguments for particular religions might point to even more detailed conclusions than do ontological arguments (see Goldschmidt 2019, since no one else is going to be citing me).

Proving the existence of God is a perennial philosophical ambition. An armchair proof would be the jackpot. And there are other philosophical benefits besides. Yujin Nagasawa (2017: 33–35) advertises ontological arguments as answers to the big question of why there is anything at all: Why is there something rather than nothing? Most ontological arguments would prove the existence of a being that could not have failed to exist. There is, then, something rather than nothing because there *had* to be something – nothingness turns out to be impossible (compare Lowe 1998: chapter 12; Coggins 2010).

1.3 History

Ontological arguments have a distinguished pedigree and are about as famous as any philosophical arguments. Anselm formulated the first and most famous ontological argument around 1077. As armchair proofs, the arguments have since attracted thinkers of a mathematical bent, such as

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- René Descartes (1596–1650), discoverer of Cartesian geometry,
- Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716), discoverer of the calculus, and
- Kurt Gödel (1906–78), of incompleteness theorem fame.

The arguments also have distinguished detractors. Anselm's argument was immediately met with the criticisms of the monk Gaunilo, who liked every part of Anselm's book except the proof. Other major critics of ontological arguments include

- Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), the most famous medieval theologian,
- David Hume (1711–76), the most famous early modern skeptic, and
- Immanuel Kant (1724–1807), a very hard read.

These critics promise very general objections against any such argument. But others settle for less ambitious objections.

Contemporary proponents of ontological arguments include Jonathan Lowe, Yujin Nagasawa, and Alvin Plantinga, and contemporary critics include Graham Oppy, William Rowe, and Peter van Inwagen. This list is *very* incomplete, as are the others. We will meet some of the main historical and contemporary proponents and opponents of ontological arguments as we go along.

The proponents of the arguments listed here are mostly Christian, Western, and male. Anselm was not translated into Hebrew or Arabic for the medieval Jewish and Muslim philosophical traditions, and ontological arguments have since attracted much less attention from Jewish, Muslim, and other philosophers than from Christian philosophers. The arguments from the Muslim philosophers, Avicenna (980–1037) and Mullah Sadra (1571–1636), are sometimes taken to be ontological. But I am inclined to count Avicenna's argument (see McGinnis 2011) as a cosmological argument, and I do not understand Sadra's argument (see Rizvi 2019).

1.4 Outline

There is as much literature on ontological arguments as on any argument in philosophy. For the purposes of a short book, some simplicity must be imposed. I present and evaluate some influential ontological arguments and some influential objections – along with some not so influential but interesting arguments and objections. The focus and order are the arguments of

- Anselm in Section 2,
- Descartes in Section 3,
- Plantinga in Section 4,

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- Lowe in Section 5, and
- a quick digest of other ontological arguments in Section 6.

And I have followed a neat pattern throughout of

- presenting the arguments with numbered premises,
- explaining the arguments, and then
- leveling objections to the arguments, along with replies to the objections.

But the order is somewhat contrived: points made about one argument often bear on others, as I will point out.

I also present the main arguments in the same kind of standard form throughout. Even where I quote an argument another author has put in a standard form, I often renumber the premises and reformat slightly for the sake of clarity and consistency. I note the editing in the citation.

1.5 Verdict

My verdict: ontological arguments should not persuade. The persuasiveness of any argument depends on

- how many people it should persuade, and
- the degree to which it should persuade them (see Rasmussen 2018: 193).

Some arguments should give anyone considering them carefully enough absolute certainty of the conclusion. Proofs of the Pythagorean theorem are examples. Some arguments should not move anyone even an iota. Ontological arguments fall somewhere between these extremes, but in my view, they are much closer to the unfortunate end. At least, this is unfortunate for me: I would love a beautiful armchair proof for a conclusion that I – as an Orthodox Jew – accept. I will explain which criticisms of ontological arguments work in the sections that follow.

There is nothing special about ontological arguments here: virtually no substantive argument in philosophy works (see van Inwagen 2006: lecture 3; Lycan 2019). Nevertheless, ontological arguments are wonderful: they get us entangled in so many other philosophical puzzles, from philosophy of religion to philosophy of language, from metaphysics to ethics, and beyond – more so, I think, than any other argument does. As Plantinga puts it:

> [M]any of the most knotty and difficult problems in philosophy meet in this argument. Is existence a property? Are existential propositions – propositions of the form *x exists* – ever necessarily true? Are existential propositions about what they seem to be about? Are there, in any respectable sense of "are,"

> some objects that do not exist? If so, do they have any properties? Can they be compared with things that do exist? These issues and a hundred others arise in connection with Anselm's argument. (1974: 85)

While my verdict is pessimistic, I hope this book shows the fruitfulness of thinking about ontological arguments.

Bertrand Russell tells us that "[t]he argument does not, to a modern mind, seem very convincing, but it is easier to feel convinced that it must be fallacious than it is to find out precisely where the fallacy lies" (2004: 536). Russell wrote in a philosophical climate much more inimical to philosophical theology than contemporary philosophy is. But I would bet the sentiment remains. Plantinga, who is not at all inimical to this business, similarly tells us:

> At first sight Anselm's argument is remarkably unconvincing if not downright irritating; it looks too much like a parlor puzzle or word magic. [And yet] it is profoundly difficult to say what, exactly, is wrong with it. Indeed, I do not believe that any philosopher has ever given a cogent and conclusive refutation of the ontological argument In Its various forms. (1974: 85–86)

While my verdict is pessimistic, none of my preferred objections rule out the possibility of a victorious ontological argument. In my view, the objections of Hume and Kant – objections that try to forever rule out the possibility – are not so powerful. So maybe a victorious ontological argument will emerge. Besides, maybe there are rebuttals to my preferred objections; who do I think I am anyhow? But there is also the risk that some new objection, as devastating as general, will emerge.

1.6 Audience

This book assumes no prior understanding of ontological arguments. The literature is canvassed, and the main ideas are distilled. The arguments and objections are simplified, at least as far as I can simplify them without sacrificing important details. But I introduce some cutting-edge ideas and some original ideas. I just don't throw readers into the deep end. I aim for a wide audience, from interested laymen to philosophy professors. I suspect that a lot of my audience will be philosophy students, undergraduate and graduate ("a lot" being very relative when writing on philosophy). To aid understanding, I make

- a lot of
- use of
- bullet points,

as you have already noticed. Except in this case, these offset crucial definitions, principles, and so on, and help readers identify them and return to them if need be. They also look pretty to me.

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1.7 Further Reading

Readers can follow my book without reading anything else on ontological arguments, including the primary sources; I quote from them liberally. But I hope that the book will spark interest in further study. For readers interested in delving more into ontological arguments, the following are especially recommended:

- Oppy (2018) – various authors study diverse ontological arguments;
- Szatkowski (2012) – various authors study diverse ontological arguments;
- Oppy (1995) – surveys and rejects diverse ontological arguments; and
- Nagasawa (2017) – defends ontological arguments from Anselm and Plantinga.

2 Anselm

2.1 Proslogion

Different ontological arguments have been discovered in or read into Anselm (see, e.g., Malcolm 1960). The main one is in his *Proslogion*, chapter 2:

> Now we believe that you are something than which nothing greater can be thought. So can it be that no such being exists, since "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'"? (Psalm 14:1, 43:1) But when this same fool hears me say "something than which nothing greater can be thought," he surely understands what he hears; and what he understands exists in his understanding, even if he does not understand that it exists [in reality]. . . . So even the fool must admit that something than which nothing greater can be thought exists at least in the understanding, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood exists in the understanding. And surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist only in the understanding. For if it exists only in the understanding, it can be thought to exist in reality as well, which is greater. So if that than which a greater cannot be thought exists only in the understanding, then the very thing than which a greater *cannot* be thought is something than which a greater *can* be thought. But that is clearly impossible. Therefore, there is no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality. (Anselm 1995: 7; also see Logan 2016)

Anselm proceeds to argue that something than which nothing greater can be thought cannot be less than omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. The rest of the *Proslogion* works out a detailed understanding of these attributes (for trouble with such a program, see Speaks 2018; for a general study of Anselm, see Visser & Williams 2008).

2.2 Interpretation

The passage is pretty but tricky. Richard Dawkins notes that "[a]n odd aspect of Anselm's argument is that it was originally addressed not to humans but to God himself, in the form of a prayer (you'd think that any entity capable of listening to a prayer would need no convincing of his own existence)" (2006: 104; see Williams 2016 on Anselm's attempt to combine two styles of writing). On the same basis, Karl Barth (1960) goes so far as to say that Anselm is not trying to prove the existence of God at all.

But Anselm is explicit that he was searching for and found "a single argument that needed nothing but itself alone for proof, that would by itself be enough to show that God really exists" (1995: 2). Anselm has faith. But – as per the original title of the *Proslogion*, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* – his faith is in search of understanding. As Ermanno Bencivenga puts it for Anselm:

> I *know* that God exists. . . . I know it from the best possible source – from revelation. . . . But still, I am a human being, and reason plays an important role for me. It gives me pleasure to see how the various tenets of my faith harmonize with one another, how what I know to be the case could not possibly be otherwise, how it is not just true but also *reasonable*. (1993: 6)

Anselm has an argument. And the argument has many interpretations. I think that the following captures what is going on in Anselm, in a close enough order and making all the premises explicit. Instead of repeating the long phrase "that than which a greater cannot be conceived" over and over again, we can abbreviate it by the term *GOD*. Thus:

1. "GOD" is understood. (Premise)
2. If "GOD" is understood, GOD exists in the understanding. (Premise)
3. Even if GOD exists only in the understanding, it can be conceived to exist in reality. (Premise)
4. GOD is greater if it exists in reality than if it exists only in the understanding. (Premise)
5. It is impossible to conceive of something greater than GOD. (Premise)
6. If GOD exists in the understanding, then GOD exists only in the understanding or in the understanding and in reality. (Premise)
7. Therefore, GOD exists in the understanding. (From 1 and 2)
8. Therefore, GOD exists only in the understanding or in the understanding and in reality. (From 6 and 7)
9. Therefore, GOD can be conceived to exist in reality. (From 3 and 7)
10. Therefore, if GOD exists only in the understanding, then it is possible to conceive of something greater than GOD. (From 4 and 9)

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11. Therefore, GOD does not exist only in the understanding. (From 5 and 10)
12. Therefore – drum roll! – GOD exists in reality. (From 8 and 10)

I have framed Anselm's argument so that the premises are up-front, but here is Oppy's way of doing it so that the reasoning is easier to follow:

1. Whatever is understood exists in the understanding. (Premise)
2. The words that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived are understood. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) That-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived exists in the understanding. (From 1 and 2)
4. If that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived exists only in the understanding, then that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived-and-that-exists-in-reality is greater than that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived. (Premise)
5. It is impossible for anything to be greater than that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived. (Premise)
6. (Therefore) That-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived does not exist only in the understanding. (From 4 and 5)
7. (Therefore) That-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived exists in reality. (From 3 and 6) (Oppy 2018: 9)

While there are fewer premises in Oppy's formulation, we would have to spend a little more time explaining the difference between his "that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived" versus "that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived-and-that-exists-in-reality." The argument is also often framed as a

- *reductio ad absurdum*: reasoning that shows that an original assumption results in a contradiction or absurdity, and so must be false.

From the premise that GOD does not exist in reality, derive the absurdity that GOD is not GOD, that something greater than that than which a greater *cannot* be conceived *can* be conceived. Conclude that the original premise that landed us in this absurdity is false and that, therefore, GOD exists in reality (compare Nagasawa 2017: 154–55; see Campbell 2018 for a reconstruction with about *220* premises).

In any case, the objections considered below apply to arguments close enough to the passage to count as an interpretation of Anselm's argument. We will explore an alternative formulation later (see Section 2.10).

2.3 Premises

But first we can explore a little more about the meaning of the premises (focusing on the premises in my own formulation). Premise 1 of my formulation captures

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Anselm here: "But when this same fool hears me say 'something than which nothing greater can be thought," he surely understand what he hears." Even the fool understands what "GOD" means. The fool must understand what "GOD" means in order to deny the existence of GOD. Compare this to the idea that we must understand what "fairy" means in order to deny the existence of fairies.

The next premise is trickier. Premise 2 is a safer instance of Anselm's "whatever is understood exists in the understanding." At the ellipsis in my quote of the argument, Anselm provides this illustration of what it is to exist in the understanding:

> When a painter, for example, thinks out in advance what he is going to paint, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand that it exists, since he has not yet painted it. But once he has painted it, he both has it in his understanding and understands that it exists because he has now painted it. (1995: 7)

Anselm takes the painting to exist, at first, in the painter's understanding and not in reality. Later, it exists in reality as well as in the understanding. The idea, then, is that there are different ways for the painting to exist: in the understanding or in reality or both. GOD similarly might exist in the understanding or in reality or both. But what exactly Anselm has in mind by existence in the understanding is tricky, as we will see (in Section 2.6).

Premises 3 and 4 capture Anselm's "if it exists only in the understanding, it can be thought to exist in reality as well, which is greater." These premises tell us that GOD might have either kind of existence or both and that one kind is better than the other. This assumes that beings can differ in greatness. But there are different kinds of greatness. Nagasawa (2017: 55) distinguishes among

- greatness for oneself (e.g., the criminal's smarts are great for himself),
- greatness for the world (e.g., the inventor's smarts are great for others),
- greatness in capacity (e.g., the sharpness is great for the knife), and
- intrinsic greatness (e.g., knowledge, power, and goodness make anything great).

What kind of greatness does Anselm have in mind? Being as sharp as a knife is certainly not a relevant property adding to GOD's greatness. The rest of the *Proslogion* spells out GOD's greatness in terms of knowledge, power, and goodness. Anselm has in mind intrinsic greatness, and premise 4 tells us that GOD's existence in reality would add to GOD's intrinsic greatness.

Finally, premise 5 captures Anselm's "that is clearly impossible." If a being is "that than which a greater *cannot* be thought" and yet also such that "a greater *can* be thought," then the being is at once the greatest that can be thought and not the greatest that can be thought – which is a contradiction and thus impossible.

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We now turn to objections against the premises in order, as well as against the inferences from them to the conclusion, and against the argument as a whole. Working through the objections also helps towards understanding the premises.

2.4 Understanding

Against premises 1 and 2, the critic might object that "GOD" is not understood and that GOD does not exist in the understanding. The first critic of Anselm's argument – Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, who liked the rest of the *Proslogion* very much – *seems* to target what we have as premise 1. Gaunilo objects:

> When I hear someone speak of that which is greater than everything else that can be thought . . . I can no more think of it or have it in my understanding in terms of anything whose genus or species I already know, than I can think of God himself. . . . For I do not know the thing itself, and I cannot form an idea of it on the basis of something like it, since you yourself claim that it is so great that nothing else could be like it. Now if I heard something said about a man I do not know at all, whose very existence is unknown to me, I could think of him in accordance with that very thing that a man is, on the basis of that knowledge of the genus or species by which I know what a man is or what men are. (1995: 30)

The passage is obscure, but the idea seems to be that we cannot understand "GOD." We can understand things – including things that we have never seen or that we deny exist – in terms of the familiar kinds they belong to. I can even understand what "centaur" means via my understanding of more familiar things (a horse, a man). However, when it comes to "GOD," there is nothing that we can similarly draw upon. There is just a word: "In the case of God, I can think of him solely on the basis of the word; and one can seldom or never think of any true thing solely on the basis of a word" (1995: 30).

Anselm replies:

> I, however, say this: if that than which a greater cannot be thought is neither understood nor thought, and exists neither in the understanding nor in thought, then either God is not that than which a greater cannot be thought, or else he is neither understood nor thought, and exists neither in the understanding nor in thought. I appeal to your own faith and conscience as the most compelling argument that this is false. Therefore, that than which a greater cannot be thought is indeed understood and thought, and exists in the understanding and thought. (1995: 36)

The reply appeals to Gaunilo's religious belief. Gaunilo understands what "GOD" means insofar as he understands what "God" means, and he does understand the