

## THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT HANDOUT

Philosophy of Religion

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1. A General Problem with a posteriori arguments for God's Existence: any given a posteriori argument for God's existence will either point to something that in principle can't be given a scientific explanation or it will point to something that can in principle but can't in practice. But any argument of the former type will be susceptible to the claim that the phenomenon/fact in question might well be brute; any argument of the latter type will be subject to potential empirical disconfirmation. A priori arguments don't have these problems.
2. For starters: Anselm's definition of God—"something than which nothing greater can be conceived," 'being,' and 'greater than,' reductio ad absurdum arguments, existence in reality and existence in the understanding.
2. Anselm's Ontological Argument (William Rowe's formulation):
  1. God exists in the understanding.
  2. God might have existed in reality (i.e., God is a possible being)
  3. If something exists only in the understanding and might have existed in reality, then it might have been greater than it is.
  4. Suppose: God exists only in the understanding.
  5. God might have been greater than He is.
  6. God is a being than which a greater is possible.
  7. The being than which none greater is possible is a being than which a greater is possible.
  8. So it is false that God exists only the understanding.
  9. So God exists in reality as well as in the understanding.
3. Objections:
  - a. Guanilo's Perfect Island Objection/Anselm's Reply
  - b. Kant's "Existence isn't a property" Objection
  - c. The Incomparability Objection
4. Descartes' version of the argument:
  1. A perfect being has all perfections
  2. Existence is a perfection
  3. A perfect being exists
5. Peter van Inwagen's reply to Kant: the argument can be reconstructed to get around the objection:
6. "Necessary Existence" (NE) Version of the Ontological Argument:
  1. A perfect being has all perfections.
  2. Necessary existence is a perfection.
  3. A perfect being has necessary existence.
  4. Anything with necessary existence exists.
  5. So, a perfect being exists.

7. Objection: This argument is ambiguous. The first premise can be read as either:

Anything that is a perfect being has all perfections.

Or

There is a perfect being that has all perfections.

So NE is really two arguments. But neither of them work. One of them proves only that anything that is a perfect being exists and the other proves it only by begging the question.

8. Modal Version of the Ontological Argument.

P1. If it is possible that God exists, then God necessarily exists.

P2. It is possible that God exists.

C1. Therefore, God necessarily exists.

P3. If God exists necessarily, then God exists.

C2. Therefore, God exists.

Objection: P2's plausibility depends on an equivocation; once things are sorted out, P2 is at best dubious.