St. Anselm’s versions of the ontological argument

Descartes is not the first philosopher to state this argument. The honor of being the first to present this argument fully and clearly belongs to Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109). He has two versions of it, and they are the most widely discussed among the many versions of this argument. Here is the first version.

*Therefore, Lord, you who give knowledge of the faith, give me as much knowledge as you know to be fitting for me, because you are as we believe and that which we believe. And indeed we believe you are something greater than which cannot be thought.*

Notice that he begins with a definition of God which is different from what Descartes gives: God is something greater than which cannot be thought. Instead of defining God as the supremely perfect being, he defines him as the greatest being one can think of. The two definitions are compatible with each other.

*Or is there no such kind of thing, for "the fool said in his heart, 'there is no God'" (Ps. 13:1, 52:1)? But certainly that same fool, having heard what I just said, "something greater than which cannot be thought," understands what he heard, and what he understands is in his thought, even if he does not think it exists. For it is one thing for something to exist in a person's thought and quite another for the person to think that thing exists. For when a painter thinks ahead to what he will paint, he has that picture in his thought, but he does not yet think it exists, because he has not done it yet. Once he has painted it he has it in his thought and thinks it exists because he has done it. Thus even the fool is compelled to grant that something greater than which cannot be thought exists in thought, because he understands what he hears, and whatever is understood exists in thought.*

Even a non-believer ("the fool") can understand this definition; but being a nonbeliever, even though he has this understanding in his mind he doesn’t think God exists in reality. The fool understands very well that something that exists in the mind does not have to exist in reality. Anselm’s example about the painter is clear enough so I will not explain it.

*And certainly that greater than which cannot be understood cannot exist only in thought, for if it exists only in thought it could also be thought of as existing in reality as well, which is greater. If, therefore, that than which greater cannot be thought exists in thought alone, then that than which greater cannot be thought turns out to be that than which something greater actually can be thought, but that is obviously impossible. Therefore something than which greater cannot be thought undoubtedly exists both in thought and in reality.*

The above conclusion is very clear. Logic demands that God cannot exist only in thought because what exists in thought can also be thought of as existing in reality and what exists in reality is greater than what exists only in thought. So if one thinks of God as existing only in thought, one can think of something else greater than him (that is, what exists both in thought and in reality), but that contradicts the definition of God. Therefore, God cannot exist only in thought. Anselm’s argument can be understood as using the method of reduction ad absurdum (see Appendix below).
His point is that when we have an idea of something, we can conceive that thing to exist no matter whether it actually exists or not. To conceive the existence of something means that it is possible for that thing to exist. Take an example of a winged horse, we do have an idea of it and we can conceive (imagine) it to exist even though it does not exist (at least not in our world). Anselm thinks that a winged horse that exists both in our mind and in reality is greater than a winged horse that exists only in our mind; but this of course does not lead to the conclusion that a winged horse exists. However the idea of God is different, in fact, it is unique among ideas of things. Taking the idea of God as something greater than which cannot be thought, if we accept that the God that exists both in our mind and in reality is greater than the God that exists only in our mind, then the conclusion is that God does exist in reality otherwise we will get a self-contradiction. The conclusion is due to the uniqueness of the phrase ‘something greater than which cannot be thought’ which applies only to God.

St.Anselm’s argument has the same structure as Descartes’ argument but it is much simpler because it doesn’t have to refer to the principle of clear and distinct perception. Both arguments say that the concept of God demands that he must exist. Other concepts do not have the same status as this concept, that is, when we have a concept of X and X is not God, it doesn’t follow that X exists in reality. The concept of God is unique because to deny that the supremely perfect being or that something greater than which cannot be thought does not exist is a contradiction. Both arguments do not have to refer to any empirical evidence, they refer only to the logic of the concept of God.

But a question remains: Is the concept of God really unique? What about the concept of the perfect man, the perfect computer, the perfect car; or the island greater than which cannot be thought, the man greater than which cannot be thought, etc? Do these have to exist in order to be perfect or to be the greatest? Descartes and Anselm cannot allow these to exist just because these concepts have the form of ‘the perfect X’, since they accept the idea that what exists in thought does not have to exist in reality. They need to explain why the concept of God is an exception to this principle. Anselm’s second version of the argument points the way.
In fact, it so undoubtedly exists that it cannot be thought of as not existing. For one can think there exists something that cannot be thought of as not existing, and that would be greater than something which can be thought of as not existing. For if that greater than which cannot be thought can be thought of as not existing, then that greater than which cannot be thought is not that greater than which cannot be thought, which does not make sense. Thus that than which nothing can be thought so undoubtedly exists that it cannot even be thought of as not existing.

Notice the phrase “cannot be thought of as not existing” which does not occur in Anselm’s first version. That which cannot be thought of as not existing is greater than something which can be thought of as not existing. Therefore God who is something greater than which cannot be thought cannot be thought of as not existing, otherwise we can think of something greater than him.

What does it mean to say that God cannot be thought of as not existing. When we look at things around us which do exist at this moment, it is possible to think that they do not exist. Descartes points that out clearly to us when I talked about his doubt in an earlier lecture. I can think that I now exist because I am thinking, but I can think that the next moment I might cease to exist. To say that things that now exist can be thought of as not existing means that these things do not have to exist. In other words, their existence is not necessary. A thing exists because something caused it to exist. If circumstances in the past were different, it would not exist. But if God cannot be thought of as not existing, then his existence is necessary i.e. he cannot fail to exist.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The structure of Anselm’s argument in the second version is simple:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The argument starts from the fool’s belief which is: something greater than which cannot be thought can be thought of as not existing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anselm then asserts that the following statement is true:</td>
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<tr>
<td>something that cannot be thought of as not existing is greater than something which can be thought of as not existing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>When we consider the above statement with the fool’s belief, we get the following statement.</td>
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<td>if something greater than which cannot be thought can be thought of as not existing, then there is something greater than it (which is something that cannot be thought of as not existing).</td>
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<tr>
<td>And so the conclusion is:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Therefore, that greater than which cannot be thought is not that greater than which cannot be thought.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Which is absurd. Where does this absurdity come from? It comes from the fool’s belief. Therefore his belief is false. What is true must be the opposite, which is: something greater than which cannot be thought cannot be thought of as not existing.</td>
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The virtue of Anselm’s second version of the argument is that, being concise and clear, it brings out the concept of necessity which is lacking in the first version. Moreover, it helps us disentangle Descartes’ complicated argument and helps us see that Descartes also makes use of this concept. Here is a passage from Descartes’ proof:

But, nevertheless, when I think of it more attentively, it appears that the existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the idea of a mountain from that of a valley, or the equality of its three angles to two right angles, from the essence of a [rectilinear] triangle; so that it is not less impossible to conceive a God, that is, a being supremely perfect, to whom existence is availing, or who is devoid of a certain perfection, than to conceive a mountain without a valley.

The word “impossible” above points to the use of this concept. At the end Descartes also makes it clear, using the word “necessary” to qualify existence.

For is there any truth more clear than the existence of a Supreme Being, or of God, seeing it is to his essence alone that necessary and eternal existence pertains?

**Necessary existence**

To say that God necessarily exists means he cannot fail to exist, he has to exist because it is part of his nature. This sound strange and the strangeness comes from the concept of necessary existence, therefore we have to first understand this concept.

To do this we must begin by understanding our own existence. Things we see around us including ourselves do not have to exist. Take ourselves for example, if the past were different, say, our parents had never met one another, then we would not have been born, or would have been born to other parents and thus were different from the persons we are now. Or the universe could have evolved in such a way that no living organisms could ever have come into being.

In other words, each thing we see around us owes its existence to a cause (consisting of one event or a set of events), therefore if we imagine that the cause of that thing doesn’t exist then that thing would fail to exist. That is to say, the existence of things we see around us is contingent on other things. This kind of existence is called a contingent existence or a possible existence. Necessary existence is the opposite of contingent existence because its existence does not depend upon anything but itself. We cannot say of a necessary being that it came into being or will one day go out of existence. This kind of talk applies only to contingent beings which have to be caused in order to exist and whose existence will transpire when certain things cause them to be annihilated. What we can say of a necessary being is that it is impossible for it not to exist.

Everything within our experience has contingent existence; none has a necessary existence. Nevertheless some people claim that there must be a necessary being. But why should we entertain the idea that there must be another kind of existence which is totally different from the only kind we experience? Some philosophers contend that
we have to hold this belief in order to make sense of the universe. They point out that if everything does not have to exist, that is, if everything is a contingent being, then it is possible that nothing exists at all. But things do exist (according to Descartes at least I exist). Therefore the fact that things do exist is a matter of accident for there is no need for them to exist. Some philosophers think this possibility makes no sense of the universe. If existence is an accident, then life is too and thus life is meaningless. To make sense of it all we need to believe that there is a necessary being which is always in existence and which causes the existence of other things. (A food for your thought: do you think this possibility is absurd? Why must there be something rather than nothing? And why the necessary being must be God, what is absurd about the idea that matter always exists in some form?)

For some people, if one accepts that we need the concept of necessary existence, then one can proceed to the proof of God’s existence based upon it. The following is a modern version of the ontological argument.

We have an idea of God as the supremely perfect being or the greatest being; that means he does not depend on anything at all; therefore he cannot be caused to exist. However, to conceive of God in this way does not automatically mean that he necessarily exists. From this conception, there are two possibilities: either he necessarily exists or it is impossible for him to exist. The second possibility obtains if it is shown that there is a contradiction in the concept of God. That is if the concept of God includes two properties which contradict each other, then it is impossible for him to come into existence. A thing has to be either $x$ or $\neg x$, it cannot be both at the same time, nothing can exist that is $x$ and $\neg x$ at the same time. One has to explore the properties attributed to God. We cannot know all the properties that God has but at least three attributes are essential for him to be the greatest: omniscience, omnipotence, maximal goodness. We can then determine whether at least two of such properties contradict each other or not. If the concept of God involves no such contradiction, then he necessarily exists. For anything that is not God, if there is no self-contradiction in its conception, then it is possible to bring it about, that is, it is possible for that thing to exist. But for God, since he cannot be caused to exist, if there is no contradiction involved in the conception of God, then he necessarily exists. We cannot say that it is possible for him to exist. We reserve that kind of description only for things that can be caused to exist.

The above argument is in fact a modern variant of Anselm’s second argument. The reason why God cannot be thought of as not existing is because God’s being independent of anything entails that he necessarily exists. Of course, Anselm does not mention the possibility of the contradiction in God’s attributes. The above argument helps point out a hurdle his argument has to go through.

However, there is an attempt to prove that there is a contradiction in God’s attributes. God is omniscient, omnipotent and maximally good. But these latter two attributes contradict one another. There are evils in the world: natural disasters kill lots of people, there are heinous crimes that go unpunished, wars ravage nations and kill millions of innocent people, and so on. God is supremely kind so he should have prevented these. He hasn’t done so, that means he cannot prevent these things from happening and thus he is not omnipotent. If he could have prevented these but has chosen not to do so, then he is not kind. Given the existence of evils in the world, God
cannot be both omnipotent and supremely kind. Whether this attempt is successful or not depends on how one explains the existence of evils. Those who believe in God must explain why the existence of evils is compatible with God having these two attributes.

Criticisms of the ontological argument

There are two famous objections to this argument: the perfect island argument and the argument that existence is not a property. We will examine them one by one.

The Perfect Island argument

According to this argument, if the ontological argument is valid, then we get the result that when we have an idea of the supremely perfect island, then that island must exist. In fact we can substitute anything for island, thus the perfect horse, the perfect woman etc. must exist. Then the universe is overpopulated with the perfect this and that. This is absurd therefore this argument is invalid. But it has the same logical structure as the ontological argument, so it follows that the ontological argument must also be invalid. Is this an effective objection? To answer this satisfactorily we will have to go back to the original argument which was put forward by a contemporary of St.Anselm in order to refute Anselm’s argument. The following is the original text presenting the perfect island argument.

IN BEHALF OF THE FOOL.

AN ANSWER TO THE ARGUMENT OF ANSELM IN THE PROSLOGIUM
BY GAUNILO, A MONK OF MARMOUTIER.

For example: it is said that somewhere in the ocean is an island, which, because of the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of discovering what does not exist, is called the lost island. And they say that this island has an inestimable wealth of all manner of riches and delicacies in greater abundance than is told of the Islands of the Blest; and that having no owner or inhabitant, it is more excellent than all other countries, which are inhabited by mankind, in the abundance with which it is stored.

Now if some one should tell me that there is such an island, I should easily understand his words, in which there is no difficulty. But suppose that he went on to say, as if by a logical inference: ‘You can no longer doubt that this island which is more excellent than all lands exists somewhere, since you have no doubt that it is in your understanding. And since it is more excellent not to be in the understanding alone, but to exist both in the understanding and in reality, for this reason it must exist. For if it does not exist, any land which really exists will be
more excellent than it; and so the island already understood by you to be more excellent will not be more excellent."

If a man should try to prove to me by such reasoning that this island truly exists, and that its existence should no longer be doubted, either I should believe that he was jesting, or I know not which I ought to regard as the greater fool: myself, supposing that I should allow this proof; or him, if he should suppose that he had established with any certainty the existence of this island. For he ought to show first that the hypothetical excellence of this island exists as a real and indubitable fact, and in no wise as any unreal object, or one whose existence is uncertain, in my understanding.

Gaunilo’s argument can be put in the following form to parody Anselm’s argument.

*I can conceive of X as an island of such excellent features that I cannot think of any islands greater than it.*

*X exists not only in the mind but also in reality, because if it exists only in the mind then we can think of an island greater than it, that is, X that exists both in the mind and in reality.*

The above argument has the same structure as Anselm’s first version of the ontological argument. If we accept Anselm’s argument then we have to accept the above argument. But then we also have to accept any arguments of the same form that seek to establish the existence of the greatest this and that. If we are averse to an overabundance of greatest things, then we have to reject any arguments of this form which include Anselm’s argument.

Therefore the perfect island argument is a successful refutation of Anselm’s first version of the ontological argument. Can we deploy it against his second version? We can try and it should look like this.

*I can conceive of X as an island of such excellent features that I cannot think of any islands greater than it.*

*It cannot be true that one can think of X as not existing, for if one can think so then one can think of an island that is greater than it, that is, X that cannot be thought of as not existing.*

But this doesn’t work. In the second sentence the clause “for if one can…not existing” is false; there is no such thing as an excellent island that cannot be thought of as not existing because an island is a thing such that its existence depends on various causes. We can think of an island as not existing by imagining the elimination of its causes. In short, an island is a contingent thing and we cannot think of it a necessary being.

Therefore, the perfect island argument doesn’t work against Anselm’s second version of the ontological argument; and it doesn’t work against Descartes’ argument either. As I mentioned above, Descartes also uses the concept of necessary existence. From
the idea of God as a supremely perfect being, he can clearly and distinctly conceive that the property of necessary existence belongs to God. The connection is that if it is not so then He can’t be supremely perfect for His existence would depend upon something else. The perfect island argument cannot be put in this form for the same reason as in the case of Anselm’s second version.

I have an idea of X as the supremely perfect island.
I can clearly and distinctly conceive that necessary existence belongs to X.
Therefore, the property of necessary existence really belongs to X.

The second premise is false and thus we cannot derive the above conclusion.

Once we understand this then we can see that Descartes’ idea of the supremely perfect being already contains in it the idea of a necessary being. The perfect island is perfect as an island, it is not the perfect being. There is no contradiction in saying that the perfect island doesn’t exist. All things in the world are beings, some might be a perfect X or a perfect Y but none is a perfect being because nothing in the world has to be (exist). This is because all things that we experience in this world are contingent beings. To be means to exist (for example, Hamlet’s famous speech: To be, or not to be: that is the question [Hamlet Act 3, Scene 1]), thus it is necessary that the supremely perfect being must exist. To say that it might not exist is a self-contradiction. This is because its supreme perfection lies in the fact that in order to exist it does not depend on anything but itself. In a nutshell, the perfect island objection puts a stress upon ‘perfect’, it fails to see that the weight of Descartes’ argument is put upon ‘being’.

In short, the ontological argument in its credible form depends upon the logical connection between the concept of the supremely perfect being or of the greatest being and that of the necessary being. The issue then turns upon the intelligibility of the concept of necessary existence. The opponent of the ontological argument can argue that this concept is unintelligible and thus the ontological argument is unsound. But to put up a strong argument along this line is not a light task.

Existence is not a property

The second objection is the most famous. It says that existence is not a property. To say that the perfect being must exist in order to be perfect is to assume that existence is a property required of perfection. To be perfect requires a certain set of properties and if existence is required that means it is a property. The reason why existence is not a property is the following. What is the difference between the idea of a hundred baht and the real one hundred baht? There can’t be any differences in properties, both have the property of consisting of one hundred one-baht coins, or of 5 twenty-baht bills, or of two fifty-baht bills, etc. There is one difference of course that the real one hundred baht exists, but that only means that there is one thing that has the above-mentioned properties. To say that X exists simply means that there is at least one thing which has the properties that X is said to have. If existence is a property, then the real one hundred baht would consist of the above-mentioned properties plus existence. Thus it doesn’t conform to the idea of a hundred baht for when we see a
hundred baht on the table, we are forced to say that this is not one hundred baht since it has one more property than those in our idea. This is absurd and the absurdity comes from believing that existence is a property, thus it cannot be a property.

Is this a valid objection? To answer this is the work of advanced logic which we cannot get into here. But proponents of the ontological argument claims that even if the objection were valid, it would apply only to Descartes’ version and St.Anselm’s first version (Anselm assumes that existence is a property of greatness), but not to Anselm’s second version. If it is true that existence is not a property, it does not follow that necessary existence is not a property. The intuitive idea is that if God would fail to be God if he did not necessarily exist, then necessary existence must be an essential property of God. To counter this idea one has to point out that the notion of necessity is unsound. This again is the work of advanced logic.

**Appendix**

The method of reductio ad absurdum

To prove that X is false, we start by supposing that X were true.

X were true

Then we use an argument to derive a conclusion from ‘X were true’.

If X were true, then Y would also be true.

Then we point out that Y is known to be false or absurd.

Y is known to be false.

Since Y is validly derived from ‘X were true’, therefore X must be false.

**OR**

To prove that X is true, we start by supposing that X were false

X were false

Then we use an argument to derive a conclusion from ‘X were false’.

If X were false, then Y would be true.

Then we point out that Y is known to be false or absurd.

Y is known to be false.

Since Y is validly derived from ‘X were false’, therefore X must be true.

A good example of this argument comes from the *Euthyphro*

To prove that Euthyphro’s definition (piety=god-beloved) is wrong: Suppose ‘What is god-beloved is the same as what is pious’ is true.

The following statements are true:

1. What is pious is loved by the gods because it is pious, not pious because it is loved
2. What is god-beloved is god-beloved because the gods love it; and that they do not love it because it is god-beloved.

If two words have the same meaning, then we can substitute one for the other in a sentence without changing the truth value of the sentence.
If we substitute ‘pious’ with ‘god-beloved’ in 1. we get:
3. What is god-beloved is loved by the gods because it is god-beloved, not god-beloved because it is loved.
The result is 3 contradicts 2.

If we substitute ‘god-beloved’ with ‘pious’ in 2. we get:
4. What is pious is pious because the gods love it; and that they do not love it because it is pious.
The result is 4 contradicts 1.

We have arrived at these contradictions because of the above supposition.

Therefore, the supposition is false and thus pious does not mean the same as god-beloved.

Another example: to prove that existence is not a property, one can do it step by step like this.
Supposition: Existence is a property

I have the idea of the amount of 100 baht. It consists of either 100 baht coins, or 5 twenty baht banknotes, or…..

Anything in reality that corresponds to this idea would be money worth 100 baht.

There is in front of me 5 twenty baht banknotes on the table.

It corresponds to a property I have in my idea, but it also has one added property, that is, the property of existence.

Therefore, what I see on the table is not the amount of 100 baht.

This conclusion is absurd, therefore the above supposition is false. That means existence is not a property.

We can understand Anselm’s first version of the ontological argument as using the above method.

To prove that something greater than which cannot be thought exists, Anselm starts from supposing that:

\textit{something greater than which cannot be thought exists only in thought}

Then he says that the following sentences are true:

\textit{A thing which exists in thought could also be thought of as existing in reality as well.}

\textit{A thing which exists both in thought and reality is greater than that which exists only in thought.}

From these he draws the following conclusion.
Therefore, if something greater than which cannot be thought exists only in thought, then there is something greater than it, that is, something greater than which cannot be thought which could also be thought of as existing in reality.

From these three statements Anselm derives the conclusion that:

That than which greater cannot be thought turns out to be that than which something greater actually can be thought.

This is a contradiction, therefore it is false that something greater than which cannot be thought exists only in thought.