# THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Related exam questions:

• If the ontological argument fails, does that mean that God is not a necessary being? (2000/6)

• 'God's existence is either impossible, contingent or necessary. Since the concept of God is coherent, his existence is not impossible, and a being whose existence is contingent would not be God. It follows that God necessarily exists.' Discuss. (2001/5)

• 'The ontological argument assumes that there can be only one greatest conceivable being, and there is no reason for believing this is true.' Discuss. (2003/6)

• Can any version of the ontological argument be defended? (2004/6)

• 'Even though ... a being of supreme perfection includes existence in the concept of its essence, yet it does not follow that its existence is anything actual'. Does Descartes give an adequate reply to this objection? (2005/4)

• What, if anything, does the ontological argument prove? (2007/5)

EITHER

(a) Are all versions of the ontological argument equally bad?

OR

(b) 'Either God exists or his existence is impossible. His existence is not impossible. Therefore God exists.' Discuss. (2008/1)

• How close does any sort of ontological argument come to 'proving' God's existence? (2009/3)

• "If non-existence disqualifies something from being the greatest conceivable thing, then the material universe is the greatest conceivable thing, because it is the greatest thing that exists. So in proving the existence of the greatest conceivable thing the ontological argument does not prove the existence of God." Is this a respectable response to the ontological proof? (2010/12)

• Some ontological arguments are better than others. Does the best of them give any reason to believe in God? (2011/13)

• What is the strongest form of the ontological argument, and does it manage to provide reason to believe that there is a God? (2013/1)

////

At its simplest, the ontological argument is the following thought:

- (1) God is the greatest conceivable being.
- (2) If God does not exist in reality (but only in the mind), then a being greater than God is conceivable (namely, one that is as great as God <u>plus</u> really exists).
- (3) Therefore, God exists in reality.

This argument type was invented by St Anselm, and spawned a whole army of variants in later centuries. Descartes and Leibniz are famous for offering their own versions. In the late 20th century, modern modal logic was deployed to prop up the argument.

There are two classic objection to OA that you should be aware of. One comes from <u>Gaunilo</u>, a contemporary of Anselm's. He argued that if (Anselm's version of) (1)–(3) is sound, then one could analogically prove the existence of the perfect island--a perfect island is the most hospitable conceivable island, hence if it didn't exist, there would be a more perfect island conceivable etc. Generally (according to this objection), if OA is sound, then we have a proof for the existence of a whole range of things (the perfect island, the perfect sandwich etc.), which is absurd. If you're interested in Anselm's reply, check out pp.17-20 of Oppy's <u>Ontological Arguments</u> (if you're *really* interested, check out ch.11 as well).

A very different and very famous objection was devised by <u>Immanuel Kant</u> much later. Kant claimed existence is not a "real predicate", i.e. "exists" does not express a property, and hence it is meaningless to say that a perfect being should be X, Y, <u>and</u> real. Saying that something is real does not tell us about some character of that thing. Kant uses the example of a hundred gold coins to illustrate that the concept of a thing does not involve anything about the thing's existence: "A hundred real thalers do not contain the least coin more than a hundred possible thalers... My financial position is, however, affected very differently by a hundred real thalers than it is by the mere concept of them (that is, of their possibility)" (Critique of Pure Reason A599). That is, even though there is a lot of difference between God's existing and God's not existing, the concept of God is unaffected by this difference (the same type of being exists or fails to exist in the two cases). You can read more about this idea in ch.10 of Oppy.

The ontological argument exists in a bewildering variety of forms. Here are four of the best-known ones:

# <u>Anselm</u>

There is no consensus about the correct reconstruction of Anselm's original argument (he seems to have had more than one). But a basic distinction Anselm seems to operating with is that between <u>existing in the intellect</u> and <u>existing in reality</u>. Using something like (1)–(3), he argues that God exists in the intellect and if God didn't exist in reality as well, then God wouldn't be the greatest conceivable being.

#### <u>Descartes</u>

Descartes seems to argue that existence is something that we simply recognize to be part of the divine essence. Just as, when we contemplate our concept of triangles, we recognize that having three sides is part of the essence of being a triangle, similarly, when we contemplate the idea of God, we recognize that existence is an intrinsic component of the divine essence.

### <u>Leibniz</u>

Leibniz wanted to improve on Descartes's OA by proving that existence is part of the divine essence. He appeals to the slightly obscure but suggestive idea that perfections are metaphysically simple (they don't concern other properties), and hence they are compatible with each other—having a perfection cannot preclude having any of the other perfections. It follows that a perfect being (one who has all perfections) is logically possible. Leibniz thought that such a being is then metaphysically possible as well. And since necessary existence is a perfection, it follows that the perfect being exists.

### <u>Alvin Plantinga</u>

In the early 1970s, Alvin Plantinga became notorious for claiming that the ontological argument is sound after all, provided that one uses modern modal logic to reconstruct it. Plantinga exploits the fact that according to the standard axioms of modern modal logic, if something is possibly necessary, then it is necessary. Since a necessary (and omnipotent etc.) being is possible (we can reason about its possibility), it follows that such a being exists.

# **Related readings:**

Brian Leftow: "<u>The ontological argument</u>" in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*.

An extremely well-written summary of various versions of OA and a defense of one particular (modern) reformulation.

Graham Oppy: <u>Ontological Arguments and Belief in God</u>. Extensive discussion of all variants of OA. Useful reference for the history of the argument (Anselm, Descartes, Leibniz).

Alvin Plantinga: "A modal version of the [ontological] argument" in his *God, Freedom, and Evil.* An outline of Plantinga's modern modal OA.

### Brian Leftow's reconstructions of some prominent versions of OA

### a G = a being than which no greater can be thought

#### Anselm: Proslogion 2

- (A1) Possibly, something is a G (there is some world W where a G exists).
- (A2) If (1) is true but no G exists in the actual world @, then for any world W where a G exists, that G could be greater (namely, if it existed in @ too).
- (A3) Therefore, a G exists in @.

<u>Anselm: Proslogion 3</u> (reconstruction 1, Leftow thinks this is not what Anselm meant)

- (B1) Possibly, something is a G.
- (B2) Being a G entails necessary existence.
- (B3) Therefore, possibly, a G exists necessarily.
- (B4) Therefore, a G exists necessarily.
- (B5) Therefore, a G exists.
- Anselm: Proslogion 3 (reconstruction 2, the correct one according to Leftow)
  - (C1) If something can be conceived but does not exist, then it is a contingent being (more precisely: it would be a contingent being if it existed).
  - (C2) A G cannot be a contingent being.

- (C3) A G can be conceived.
- (C4) Therefore, a G exists.

Or, using possibility instead of conceivability:

- (D1) If something exists in world W but does not in @, then it is contingent being.
- (D2) If a G exists in some world W, it isn't a contingent being.
- (D3) A G exists in some world W.
- (D4) Therefore, a G exists in @.

#### **Descartes**

Basic idea (Meditation V):

"It is necessary for me to suppose God exists, once I have made the supposition that he has all perfections (since existence is a perfection)."

- (E1) If the essence of x includes F, then x is F.
- (E2) The essence of God includes existence.
- (E3) Therefore, God exists.

Problem: (E1) is false. (Leftow's example: the essence of Santa Claus includes that he has a beard, but it doesn't follow that Santa has a beard.)

#### <u>Leibniz</u>

- (F1) If a necessary being is possible, it exists.
- (F2) If God is possible, God is a necessary being (because necessary existence is part of God's essence).
- (F3) Therefore, if God is possible, God exists.

Leibniz then goes on to "prove" that God is possible. The argument is roughly this:

- (F4) Something is possible iff its essence does not involve a contradiction.
- (F5) God's essence is composed of all and only perfections.
- (F6) Perfections are simple and positive properties (simple = not composed of other properties, positive = does not entail the negation of any positive property).
- (F7) Hence God's essence doesn't involve a contradiction.
- (F8) Hence God is possible.

Problem: (F4) and (F6) will prove the existence of all sorts of semi-divine being (ones that have some but not all perfections).

### <u>Plantinga</u>

x is maximally great =<sub>df</sub> x is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect in every possible world

- (G1) There is a world W containing a maximally great being.
- (G2) Therefore, W contains a being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect in every possible world.
- (G3) Therefore, God exists.

# (Same as (B1)-(B5).)

### <u>Gödel</u>

This is basically a very complicated version of Leibniz's argument. In rough outline, it goes like this:

- (H0) A property is consistent  $=_{df}$  it doesn't entail its own negation.
- (H1) Every consistent property is possibly exemplified.
- (H2) If a property P is positive, any property entailed by P is positive.
- (H3) Necessary existence is a positive property.
- (H4) Being divine  $=_{df}$  the property of having all and only the positive properties essentially.
- (H5) By (H2) and (H4), being divine is consistent.
- (H6) Therefore, by (H1) and (H5), being divine is possibly exemplified.
- (H7) Therefore, by (H3) and (H6), it is possible that a divine being necessarily exists.
- (H8) Therefore, a divine being exists.