Anselm and Descartes’ model of Ontological Argument in proving the existence of God;
A Comparative Study

Ardeshir Monazami
Mehdi GHavami
Yuosef Abasi
Mehrdad Amiri
From University of Lorestan

Abstract
Ontological Argument tries to “prove” the existence of God by establishing the necessity of God’s existence through an explanation of the concept of existence or necessary being. Several philosophers have used the ontological argument for the existence of God. Anselm and Descartes are philosophers who have used the ontological argument for the existence of God. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury first set forth the Ontological Argument in the eleventh century. This argument is the primary locus for such philosophical problems as whether existence is a property and whether or not the notion of necessary existence is intelligible. Descartes argued that God's existence can be deduced from his nature, just as geometric ideas can be deduced from the nature of shapes—he used the deduction of the sizes of angles in a triangle as an example. He suggested that the concept of God is that of a supremely perfect being, holding all perfections. In this paper we examine the ontological argument from Anselm and Descartes' view.

Keywords: Argument, Ontological, existence, God, Prove

1- Anselm's Ontological Argument
Anselm, probably the greatest theologian to become Archbishop of Canterbury, was the first to develop a comprehensive ontological argument for the existence of God. His is a two stage thesis which begins with a primary formula, or name, for God: the "that" beyond which nothing of any greater quality (power, intelligence, love, truth) can be conceived. Anselm then goes on to use this formula as a basis for the two basic forms of his argument:

1) the intrinsic quality of God's existence in relation to the divine nature and, 2) the absolute necessity of God's existence in relation to this very same nature. His is, ostensibly, an argument based on reason. It is also, as will become clear, a tautological argument which is difficult to support without reference to a pre-existent faith.

Anselm begins, as has already been stated, by rooting his Christian understanding of God within the following formula: "a being than which nothing greater can be thought." (p. 73) This is a greatness, not in size or space, but in perfection -- perfection of intelligence, power, truth, love, all that makes perfection is found within this being. It should also be noted that this most perfect conceivable being is not, contrary to some thought, the most perfect being in existence. By simple definition, a most perfect being does exist; this being, however, may not be what Anselm posits as God. Therefore, rather than establishing that God is the most perfect being in existence, Anselm argues that God is so perfect that no more perfect being can even be conceived. This issue, while it sounds like the splitting of hairs, will become important when the objection of Gaunilo is addressed.

The two basic stages of Anselm's argument follow upon this description of God's nature; while separate, both clearly support and rely upon each other for their common argument. In
the first stage of his argument, Anselm addresses the difference between the two forms of existence: mind and reality. If the most perfect conceivable being existed only in the mind, a clear contradiction would be established since it is obviously possible to conceive of a still more perfect being—essentially, this would be the same being which was originally understood as existing only in the mind, but now it is understood as also existing in reality. This argument is found in chapter two of Anselm's Proslogion:

....if that than which a greater cannot be thought is in the understanding alone, this same thing than which a greater cannot be thought is that than which a greater can be thought. But obviously this is impossible. Without doubt, therefore, there exists, both in the understanding and in reality, something than which a greater cannot be thought (SM-Anselm: p. 74; emphases added).

This "something than which" is a being which exists both in mind and in reality. The differentiation is between actual and theorized existence: those things which have only imaginary existence are considered to be of lesser perfection than those which exist.

In the third chapter, Anslem states his argument again; however, here he is not interested in merely the existence of God, but in the sheer necessity of God's existence. This necessity is rooted in the self-existence of God, which leads Anselm to the notion that a lack of existence is impossible for God. Since God is a being of such perfection that none more perfect can be conceived, God can never be understood as having come into existence, nor can God be thought of as ceasing to exist. To entertain such thoughts would make God contingent upon something beyond the divinity, and this is ruled out by God's nature as a being of self-existence—or, more literally, as a being dependent on none other than itself for existence. It, therefore, follows that:

.....something can be thought of as existing, which cannot be thought of as not existing, and this is greater than that which can be thought of as not existing. Thus, if that than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought of as not existing, this very thing which a greater cannot be thought is not that than which a greater cannot be thought. But this is contradictory. So, then, there is truly a being than which a greater cannot be thought--so truly that it cannot even be thought of as not existing (SM-Anselm: p. 74).

Put much more succintly: the very nature of the divine as being the ultimate perfection beyond which nothing greater can be posited assumes the necessity of its existence. This is the reverse of the first form of the argument for, instead of first positing the divine existence in mind, then in reality, the argument is one of existence as a necessary component of God's perfect, self-sufficient nature. For God, existence is a necessity -- not a luxury.

In introducing the ontological argument, Anselm refers to the psalmist's "fool" who says at heart, "There is no God." (Psalms 14:1 and 53:1) Even such a person, he says, possess the idea of God as the greatest conceivable being, the implications of which lead to the inescapable conclusion that this being must have actual, as well as imaginary, existence. Gaunilo, a monk at Marmoutiers in France and a contemporary of Anselm, in his work In Behalf of the Fool, claimed that Anselm's reasoning must necessarily lead to outrageous conclusions if carried to their fullest extent. Gaunilo establishes an apparently parallel ontological argument in which the question is not the existence of God, but rather the existence of a most perfect island.
When someone tells me that there is such an island, I easily understand what is being said, for there is nothing difficult here. Suppose, however, as a consequence of this, he then goes on to say: you cannot doubt that this island... actually exists somewhere in reality, because it undoubtedly stands in relation to your understanding. Since it is more excellent, not simply to stand in relation to the understanding, but to be in reality as well, therefore this island must necessarily be in reality. (Hick, John, ed., Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 33.)

What can be identified as Gaunilo's basic error in his counter-argument is that he spoke of the most perfect island instead of the most perfect island conceivable. In Anselm's formulation, it is this very nature which separates the Divine from the mortal. The second stage in his ontological argument provides Anslem with his response to Gaunilo, and it extends from just this point: the idea which is lacking in the concept of a perfect island is its necessary existence. Any material object, including an island, is part of the contingent world. Even a most perfect island -- so long as it was a real island, being part of the physical world -- is, by definition, a dependent reality which can, without contradiction, be thought not to exist.

...if anyone discovers something for me, other than that "than which a greater cannot be thought," existing either in reality or in thought alone, to which the logic of my argument can be applied, I shall find his lost island and give it to him, never to be lost again.(SM-Anselm: p. 94)

Therefore, Anselm's principle does not apply to the island parallel, or to any object other than the divine; the principle only applies to the most perfect conceivable being, which is defined as having eternal and independent, or necessary, existence.

The question of the existence of God was solved, for Anselm, through a rational approach. His conclusions, however, do not provide a proof for the existence of God. The reason for this rests, primarily, in the fundamental premise of his argument. It is, first and foremost, an argument from a position of faith. True, Anselm's address of the subject has many characteristics of a syllogism, with a logical progression of thought, clearly and precisely laid out as the argument moves from point one to point two. However, Anselm's reasoning is tautological -- that is, it argues in circles. He begins with a fundamental premise, assumed to be fact: God is "a being than which nothing greater can be thought" (SM--Anselm: p. 73.). He "proves" it only through an appeal to divine revelation, and as such it is a faith-based premise. As was clearly recognized by John Duns Scotus, Anselm's arguments are a priori in nature because they derive from divine revelation, and not from "actual and distinct knowledge of God" (SM--John Duns Scotus: p. 435). Anselm's entire argument is then built from this definition of the divine. Both stages require this starting point, and if they are followed through to their conclusions they eventually end up where they begin--ie., affirming that God is "a being than which nothing greater can be thought" (SM--Anselm: p. 73). In this way, Anselm's ontological argument may serve a believer well in providing a better understanding of God, and the divine relationship to reality, but it cannot prove, apart from faith, that God does actually exist.

This conclusion can be demonstrated, not with Gaunilo's island argument, but through a basic question: what if Anselm's fundamental premise -- the definition of God as the that beyond which nothing greater can be conceived -- is false? This question is not asking if the definition of God is inaccurate, which leaves the way clear for Anselm's response to Gaunilo. Instead, the question is keyed to the possibility that God may, indeed, not exist. While the author of
this paper denies the question as ultimately untrue (i.e., God does exist), it is a valid one to ask in just this type of a discussion. Anselm's argument requires an initial assumption of God as existing in some state -- at least in the mind. The idea that the thought of God's existence makes it requisite that God does, indeed, exist, is just another appeal to the initial faith premise.

Matthew of Aquasparta provides us with a fairly good view of the way in which Anslem might be understood. He addresses the question of faith as opposed to knowledge, and establishes two important distinctions. Firstly, he posits that in the face of "full, clear, and immediate evidence there cannot be faith. On the contrary, this altogether eliminates faith" (SM--Matthew of Aquasparta: p. 418). Secondly, when confronted with 'partial and mediate knowledge there can be faith, and it does not destroy faith' (ibid). This second type of understanding requires the mediation of reason in order to make sense of those things believed through faith, and it is this second form of knowing that Anselm apparently uses. Whether or not Anselm understands himself as doing so is not the question; indeed, we are simply searching for another way to come to grips with the question of the use of reason in the contemplation of faith assumptions.

Anselm's ontological argument is a syllogistic tautology which attempts to prove that God exists, but does so a priori and not from a premise which can be demonstrated apart from faith. His fundamental premise is that God's nature is such that nothing greater that God can even be conceived. The proof extends from this assumption, stating that God exists not only in the mind, but also in reality, due to the very nature of "Godness." Also, God cannot be understood as not existing, since the existence of God is necessary. That this is not a proof of God's existence does not invalidate Anselm for a faith approach to an understanding of God, but it does leave the field open for further attempts to prove the existence of the Divine through rational means.1

2-Descartes' Ontological Argument

This paper is an examination of Descartes' ontological argument, the traditional and modern criticisms of the argument, and some of the contemporary commentary on ontological type arguments. I will first look at the ontological argument as it is presented in Descartes' major works, and then form an interpretation of the argument in its final form. The emphasis in interpretation will be on the attempt to find the most plausible and interesting argument among the varying expressions which Descartes gives to the ontological argument.

I will then look at and try to evaluate some of the criticisms that seem to be relevant to Descartes' argument. Criticisms offered by Descartes' contemporaries, as well as those offered by modern and contemporary philosophers, will be examined. Throughout the paper, I will not limit myself to those sources which directly refer to Descartes: I will also look at those criticisms of other statements of the argument that seem to be relevant. I will conclude by attempting to make an overall evaluation of the argument in light of the considerations discussed. My main thesis is that the inclusion of the notion of necessary existence, as introduced by Descartes in the later statements of the argument, gives the argument a certain plausibility that, while being far from totally convincing, establishes a definite price for the rejection of its conclusion.

2-1- The Argument

The ontological argument receives its major expression from Descartes in Meditation V.
... from the very fact that I can derive from my thoughts the idea of something, it follows that all that I clearly and distinctly recognize as characteristic of this thing does in reality characterize it ... It is certain that I find in my mind the idea of God, of a supremely perfect being... and I recognize that an actual and eternal existence belongs to his nature ....2

After considering the objection that there is a distinction between existence and essence, that one could attribute existence to the nature of God even though no God existed, Descartes offers these further qualifications of the argument:

From the fact alone that I cannot conceive of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from him, and consequently that he does, in truth, exist. Not that my thought can bring about this result or that it imposes any necessity upon things: on the contrary, the necessity which is in the thing itself — that is, the necessity of the existence of God—determines me to have this thought. For it is not, in my power to conceive of a God without existence—that is to say, of a supremely perfect Being without a supreme perfection ... 3

In the logical development of the Meditations, the ontological argument is an extraneous consideration, brought in during a discussion of the essences of material things after the existence of God had already been proven in the third Meditation, in the Principles of Philosophy and in the arguments drawn up in geometrical order given in the replies to the objections the argument is given a much more prominent position. It is also in these expressions of the argument that the notion of necessary existence receives its fullest exposition.

As can be seen from the following passages, Descartes makes it clear that he is referring to a special kind of existence, necessary and eternal existence:

When mind ... discovers the idea of a Being who is omniscient, omnipotent and absolutely perfect ... in it it recognizes not merely a possible and contingent existence, as in all other ideas it has of things, ... but one that is absolutely necessary and eternal. ... from the fact that it perceives that necessary and eternal existence is comprised in the idea it has of an absolutely perfect being, it has clearly to conclude that this absolutely perfect being exists.4

But if I think that existence is contained in the idea of a body of highest perfection, because it is a greater perfection to exist in reality as well as in the mind than to exist in intellect alone, I cannot conclude that this utterly perfect body exists, but merely that it may exist. ... when I examine this idea of body I see in it no force by means of which it may produce or preserve itself. I rightly conclude that necessary existence, which alone here is in question does not belong to the nature of a body .... But yet if we consider whether existence is congruous with a being of the highest perfection and what sort of existence is so, we shall be able to clearly and distinctly perceive in the first place that possible existence is at least predicable of it, as it is of all other things of which we have a distinct idea.... Further, because we cannot think of God's existence as, being possible, without at the same time ... acknowledging that He can exist by His own might, we hence conclude that He really exists and has existed from all eternity....6

Existence is contained in the idea or concept of everything, because we can conceive of nothing except as existent, with this difference, that possible or contingent existence is contained in the concept of a limited thing, but necessary and perfect existence in the concept of a supremely perfect being. ... To say something is contained in the nature or concept of anything is the same as to say that it is true of that thing. But necessary existence is contained in the concept of God. Hence it is true to affirm of God that necessary existence exists in him, or that God himself exists. 7
I have quoted from these passages at considerable length in order to show that Descartes unequivocally offers an argument that differs considerably from traditional interpretations of the ontological argument. The archetype for most of these traditional interpretations is the ontological argument given by St. Anselm in Proslogium II. Descartes argument, as interpreted traditionally is something like this: I have an idea of God as a supremely perfect being. Existence is a perfection. God must exist in reality or else the supremely perfect being would lack a perfection, and this is absurd. God's essence or nature contains existence just as the essence of a triangle contains it having three sides. The emphasis in these types of interpretations is on the use of existence as a predicate and a perfection which one must attribute to the nature of the supremely perfect being. Philosophers who have made this type of interpretation of Descartes ontological argument are Bertrand Russell 8, Bernard Williams9, Norman Kemp Smith10, and John Hick11, to name just a few.

While this interpretation fits the first passage quoted from the Meditations above (p. 2) and makes for an easy identification of Descartes argument with that of Anselm, it does not fit the second passage from the Meditations quoted above and is in open contradiction to much of what is said in the Principles and the replies to the objections. In the reply to the first objection quoted above (p. 3) Descartes openly rejects this type of interpretation.12 Any interpretation that pretends to adequacy must do justice to the clearness and directness with which declares that he is dealing with necessary existence as part of the perfection of God, not simply existence, which he admits is part of the essence of anything conceivable. When one looks at the latter part of Meditation V in this light, and when one sees Descartes' remark after one of the clearest of his expositions of the argument in the replies, ("All this ... differs from what I have already written only in the method of explanation adopted"13) it is clear that it will not do to maintain there are two separate arguments in: the Meditations and in the replies.

I shall try to give an interpretation of the argument that is in accord with both the text and general scheme of the Meditations as well as the replies to the objections and the Principles. From his discussion of essences in the beginning of Meditation V, Descartes concludes that all that one clearly and distinctly perceives as characteristic of the essence of a thing does actually characterize it.14 To say that something is contained in the essence of anything is to say that it is true of that thing.15 I have an idea of God as a supremely perfect being. Upon reflection, I find that the essence of a supremely perfect being must contain necessary and eternal existence.16 I cannot conceive of God as not existing; this is not because my thought imposes the necessity, but because eternal and unconditioned existence is required by God's nature as omnipotent and perfect. My idea of God insofar as it is adequate or clear and distinct must reflect this necessity.17 The essence of God contains necessary existence: God exists. In the special case of perfection, my idea must have objective reality due to the character of what it represents.

A few comments are in order before moving on to a consideration of the criticisms of the argument. It is clear that what Descartes means by necessary existence here is not what modern philosophers call logical necessity. Descartes is dealing with ontological necessity or eternal and unconditioned existence. He brings in considerations of epistemological and psychological necessity because on his epistemology, these considerations enable us to know with certainty about ontological considerations. A great many of the criticisms of the argument are aimed at this epistemology rather than the argument itself. The two are not necessarily interdependent.

The distinction between contingent and necessary properties for Descartes is very important. He almost always is referring to either contingent or necessary existence rather than simply to plain existence as is most commonly supposed. For example, when Descartes says, "... we can conceive nothing except as existent," he means that contingent or possible existence is contained in the essence of everything that is not contradictory, not
actual existence. In plainer language, everything that is coherently conceivable is a possible actual-existent. God is a necessary actual-existent. This will be dealt with more fully in the next section.

Notes:
1 Anselm's Ontological Argument For the Existence of God By: Rev. Gregory S. Neal
3 Ibid., pp. 63-64.
5 Haldane and Ross, op. cit. p. 21.
6 Ibid. p.21.
7 Ibid. p.57.
12 Haldane. and Ross, pp. cit., p. 21.
13 Ibid., p. 22.
14 Lafleur, op. cit., p. 62.
15 Haldane and Ross, op. cit., p. 57.
16 Ibid., p. 186.
17 Lafleur, op. cit., p. 64 and Haldane and Ross p. 21.
References
Anselm, St. Anselm; Basic Writings(ed. by S.N. Deane), LaSalle: Open Court, 1968.
______, The Logic of Perfection and Other Essays in Neoclassical Metaphysics, LaSalle: Open Court, 1962.