1.2

Arguments for the existence of God

The Ontological Argument

This chapter will cover:
- Anselm's *a priori* argument
- Criticisms from Gaunilo and Kant

You will need to consider six things for this section

1 The basis of Anselm's argument in thought.

2 Anselm's *a priori* Ontological Argument.

3 Criticisms from Gaunilo and Kant.

4 The strengths and weaknesses of Anselm's argument.

5 The status of Anselm's argument as a 'proof'.

6 The value of Anselm's argument for religious faith.

When looking at the Ontological Argument, it is best to start with its technical vocabulary, because the vocabulary defines the argument. Make sure you understand these terms thoroughly before going on to Anselm's Ontological Argument – it will make your studies a lot easier.

Technical terms for the Ontological Argument

a priori **and** *a posteriori*
These you know from the Design Argument. '*A priori*' arguments rely on logical deduction and not on sense experience. An *a priori* argument is prior to / before sense experience. '*A posteriori*' arguments depend on sense experience: think of 'posterior' – behind / after sense experience. For example, that 'oak trees grow from acorns' can only be known by sense experience and not by logic.

inductive and **deductive**
'Inductive' you already know from the Design Argument. An inductive argument is probabilistic, because the truth of its conclusion cannot be guaranteed by the truth of its premises. In a 'deductive' argument, if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true. To explain 'deductive', we'll start with 'premise'. A premise is a proposition upon which an argument is based or from which a conclusion is drawn. A deductive argument is one which is intended to guarantee the truth of the conclusion so long as its premises are true. As an example

(in which P1 / P2 stand for Premise 1 / Premise 2 and C stands for Conclusion):

P1 All horses have manes.

P2 A Suffolk Punch is a horse.

C   Therefore Suffolk Punches have manes.

Another example from mathematics:

P1 If a = b

P2 and b = c

C   then a = c.

This kind of reasoning is *a priori*, meaning that it relies on logical deduction and not sense experience. The Ontological Argument is an *a priori* argument which claims to prove that God exists.

synthetic and analytic
'Synthetic' statements / propositions are those whose truth or falsity are determined by sense experience, for example, 'William has a hairy chest'. 'Analytic' statements / propositions are those that are true by the meaning of the words used, for example, 'A bicycle has two wheels' is analytic because by definition a bicycle is a two-wheeled vehicle. In short, analytic statements are true by definition.

subject and predicate
Any complete sentence contains a subject and a predicate. The 'subject' refers to who or what the sentence is about and the 'predicate' gives us information about the subject. In the following sentences, the subject is underlined and the predicate is in italics: George *played the piano*. The dog *barked*. The girl in the red high-heeled shoes *starred in a film*.

necessary and contingent
We can talk about necessary and contingent 'things' and necessary and contingent 'truths'. A 'necessary truth' is a proposition that could not possibly be false, for example, that 2 + 2 = 4, or 'squares have 4 sides'. A 'contingent truth' is a proposition that happens to be true but might have been otherwise, for example, 'In the UK police cars use blue flashing lights in an emergency' – it is possible that they could have been red.

A 'necessary thing' is something that could not possibly have failed to exist, for example, some argue that the laws of mathematics exist necessarily. A 'contingent thing' is one which does not exist necessarily and so could have failed to exist. Most things in the universe are said to be contingent, including people – your parents might never have met, for example.

Activity

Identify which two of the following statements are analytic and explain why.

1   There are mountains on the far side of the Moon.

2   The Sun will rise tomorrow.

3   Frozen water is ice.

4   All bachelors are unhappy.

5   Spinsters are unmarried women.

6   Cows exist.

Key terms

subject Any complete sentence contains a subject and a predicate. The **subject** refers to who or what the sentence is about.

predicate Any complete sentence contains a subject and a predicate. The **predicate** gives us information about the subject.

Activity

Identify the **subject** and **predicate** in the following sentences.

1   Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.

2   Henry's broken toe will heal itself in about two months.

3   The love of money is the root of all evil.

4   *Tyrannosaurus rex* was one of the largest land predators ever to exist.

5   Happiness is sometimes hard to define.

The basis of Anselm's argument in thought

1 The term 'ontological' comes from the Greek *ontos*, meaning 'essence', 'existence', 'being'. Anselm's eleventh-century argument was the first of its kind and continues to resurface in different forms. The Ontological Argument is based on the claim that God's existence can be deduced from his definition – that once God is correctly defined, there can be no doubt that he exists.

2 If you look, now, at the technical terms listed above, you will be able to see what it means to say that Anselm's Ontological Argument has its basis in thought.

The Ontological Argument claims that:
- The proposition 'God exists' is *a **priori***/**deductive** – it can be known to be true without reference to sense experience, just by thinking about God's nature.
- In the proposition 'God exists', the subject 'God' contains the predicate 'exists', so God must exist.
- God's existence is a **necessary** truth, not a **contingent** one.

Do not worry if this sounds too technical (the Ontological Argument is technical!): these points will become clear as we look at Anselm's argument.

Bear in mind before we start that most of the terminology we have just looked at is not used by Anselm. When he says, for example, that 'God cannot not-exist', we would generally say that God exists 'necessarily', whereas all things exist 'contingently'. The modern wording has been used for clarity, but Anselm's wording can be found in many of the larger commentaries and online. Elsewhere in this book, the various writers have generally been left to speak for themselves.

> **Key terms**
>
> ***a priori*** Argument which relies on logical deduction and not on sense experience. An *a priori* argument is prior to / before sense experience.
>
> **deductive** Argument where if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true.
>
> **necessary** A necessary truth is a proposition that could not possibly be false. A necessary thing is something that could not possibly have failed to exist.
>
> **contingent** A contingent truth is a proposition that happens to be true but might have been otherwise. A contingent thing is one which does not exist necessarily and so could have failed to exist.

Anselm's *a priori* Ontological Argument and criticism from Gaunilo

Gaunilo's criticism of Anselm needs to be considered alongside Anselm's argument, since Anselm's reply to Gaunilo was part of his formulation of the argument.

> **Anselm (*c.* 1033–1109)**
>
> Anselm is famous (some students might say infamous) for inventing the Ontological Argument. Very much to his credit, Anselm made a meticulous and positive analysis of religious language about 800 years before the logical positivists (of whom you will learn more at A Level) were even thought of. Anselm was many things: a Benedictine monk, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 until his death, and of course, eventually, a saint of the Church.
>
> His Ontological Argument appears in *Proslogium* (1077–1078) Chapters 2–4 and also in his *Responsio* to Gaunilo. (Note 1)
>
> Gaunilo was a contemporary of Anselm. He was also a Benedictine monk in the Marmoutier Abbey in France. He wrote *On Behalf of the Fool*, which essentially rejected Anselm's attempt to give an *a priori* proof of the existence of God.

Anselm's Ontological Argument comes in two parts, the whole being couched in a prayerful meditation to God, which we look at later.

Anselm part 1 The Ontological Argument from *Proslogium* 2

God is '… a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.' (Note 2)

Here is a summary of Anselm's argument in relatively modern English.

P1 God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.

P2 This is a definition which even a fool understands in his mind, even though he does not understand it to exist in reality.

P3 There is a difference between having an idea in the mind and knowing that this idea exists in reality.

P4 For example, a painter has an idea in his mind of what he wants to paint; but when he has painted it, that idea now exists both in his mind and in reality.

P5 It is greater to exist both in the mind and in reality than to exist only in the mind.

P6 If God existed only in the mind, I could think of something greater, namely a God who existed in reality also.

C Therefore in order to be the greatest conceivable being (**P1**), God must exist both in the mind and in reality.

The two really important claims here are those in **P1** and **P5**.

In **P1**, by describing God as:

> ' … a being than which nothing greater can be conceived … '

Anselm means 'greatest' in every possible respect: God is omnipotent and omniscient, and in fact must possess every great-making quality to the highest possible level.

In **P5**, Anselm claims that it is greater to exist both in the mind and reality than to exist only in the mind. This seems like a reasonable claim. You can imagine the necessities of life such as food and water, but to be able to eat and drink in reality is surely a much greater thing than simply thinking about it.

We can therefore reduce Anselm's arguments to two essential premises and a conclusion.

P1 God is the greatest conceivable being.

P2 It is greater to exist in reality than to exist only in the mind.

C Therefore, as the greatest conceivable being, God must exist in reality.

Criticism of Anselm by Gaunilo: *On Behalf of the Fool*

Anselm's argument was criticised by a fellow monk, Gaunilo of Marmoutiers. Anselm appears not to have minded the criticism, since it gave him the chance to emphasise a second stage of his argument in his *Responsio*; so from early on, Anselm arranged that the *Proslogium* should appear with Gaunilo's criticisms attached. (Note 3)

Gaunilo's attack used a parody of Anselm's argument. He gave an Ontological Argument for the existence of a 'perfect lost island' – an island than which nothing greater can be conceived – in which he used the structure of Anselm's argument.

The following puts Gaunilo's argument in parallel with that of Anselm, using the shorter form above:

P1   It is possible to conceive of the most perfect and real lost island.

P2   It is greater to exist in reality than to exist only in the mind.

**C**   Therefore the most perfect and real lost island must exist in reality.

Gaunilo clearly believes that the concept of 'the most perfect and real lost island' makes no sense, since we know that such an island cannot exist. Gaunilo is using a method of argument called a *reductio ad absurdum*, which is Latin for 'argument to absurdity'. He is suggesting that Anselm's argument can be used to prove the existence of an endless number of perfect objects – perfect lost cricket bats, perfect oak trees, perfect what you like, and so the real fool would be anybody who argued in this way.

Anselm part 2 Anselm's reply to Gaunilo: The Ontological Argument from *Proslogium 3* and the *Responsio*

Activity

In order to get the gist of Anselm's response to Gaunilo, try the following exercise.

Your idea of a perfect island might include some of the following: lots of sunshine, shady palm trees, coconut trees, grape vines, surfing beaches, sun-bathing beaches, swimming beaches, the most magnificent bars, restaurants, hotels and night clubs, swimming pools and an absence of exams.
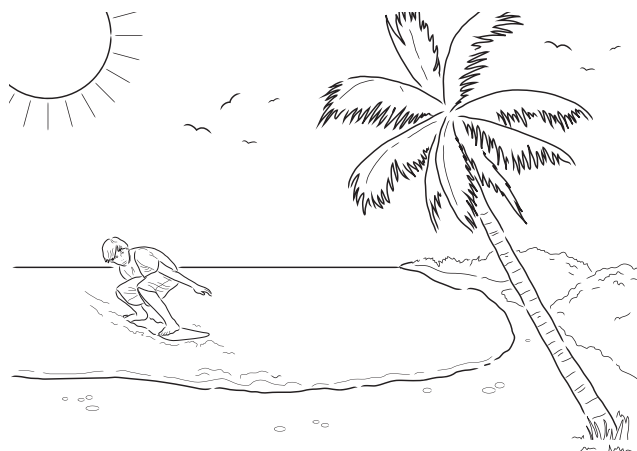
What is your idea of a perfect island?

Now answer these two questions.

1   Would you ever decide once and for all what your idea of a perfect island would be like, or would your definition change from day to day?

2   If you lived for a million years, would you ever find anybody else with exactly the same definition as yours?

The chances are that you have answered 'No' to both questions in the activity, and therein lies the clue to Anselm's rejection of Gaunilo's argument.

- Anselm's reply is drawn out of his second version of his Ontological Argument in *Proslogium* 3:

> God cannot be conceived not to exist – God is that, than which nothing greater can be conceived – That which can be conceived not to exist is not God. (Note 4)

- This is developed further in the *Responsio*, where Anselm points out the difference between necessary and contingent existence (see the technical terms from earlier).

First: as you have probably seen from the Activity, everything that you might want to exist on your 'perfect' island is contingent – it can exist or not exist. What is a beautiful palm tree will one day rot to pieces. A beautiful bar will eventually weather and fall apart or at the very least it will need constant repairs, until eventually it is no longer the same bar.

Second: it is impossible to quantify the idea of a perfect island. How many trees must it have to be perfect? If you decided on a number and then change your mind and added one more, would that number still be perfect? If your perfect drink is a tequila sunrise, but after a few years of drinking you grow to dislike the taste and change to lemonade, what has become of your perfect drink?

We can formulate Anselm's response to Gaunilo in the following way:

P1 To be perfect, an island would have to be 'that island than which no greater can be conceived'.

P2 An island than which no greater can be conceived would have to exist necessarily, since a contingent island would be less perfect than an island that existed necessarily.

P3 But islands are contingent, and by definition no contingent thing can exist necessarily.

C Therefore that which can be conceived not to exist is not God.

Further:

P1 God is the greatest conceivable being.

P2 The greatest conceivable being cannot be conceived not to exist.

**C1** Therefore, God, and God alone, possesses necessary existence: God cannot not exist.

In summary, Anselm gives a clear refutation of Gaunilo's 'perfect lost island' argument. He shows that necessary existence is a predicate only of God, and not of things.

Kant's objections to Ontological Arguments are not so easy to dismiss.

Criticisms from Kant

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

Kant was without doubt one of the most influential of 'modern' philosophers. He lived (and died) in Königsberg, Prussia, which after 1946 became part of Russia. When you refer to him, do resist the urge to reproduce some of the popular stories about him, for example, that he was so regular in his daily walks his neighbours set their clocks by him, or that he never travelled more than 10 miles from home – the second of these is certainly false. Simply, cherish such information to flesh out your picture of Kant's possible character.
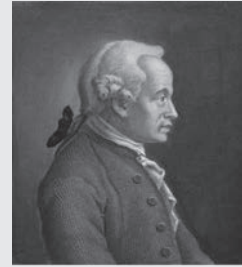
Also, do not make the unfortunate mistake of rendering his first name as 'Emmanuelle'. As a matter of fact Kant was christened 'Emanuel' but he later changed it to 'Immanuel', that being a more faithful transliteration of the original Hebrew, which means 'God (is) with us'. (Note 5)

Kant had two major criticisms of the Ontological Argument. These were directed not at Anselm, but at the version of the Ontological Argument written by the French philosopher René Descartes in the mid-seventeenth century, although to some extent they apply also to Anselm's version of the argument. In other words, do not make the mistake of thinking that Kant is offering direct criticism of Anselm's argument.

Objection 1: Existence is not a predicate

Descartes defined God as 'the supremely perfect being', meaning that God must possess all the perfect predicates such as omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, and so on. In addition, therefore, God must possess the perfection of existence:

> '… it is quite evident that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle, or that the idea of a mountain can be separated from the idea of a valley. Hence it is just as much of a contradiction to think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking a perfection), as it is to think of a mountain without a valley.' **(Note 6)**

You will see that this is similar to the argument made by Anselm's *Proslogium*, where he states that the greatest conceivable being must possess the perfection / predicate of existence, because it is greater for such a being to exist in reality than to exist only in the mind.

Kant's objection is simple: existence is not a real predicate, because it adds nothing to the concept of a thing. Real predicates give us new knowledge of a subject. If your teacher brings a black cow into the classroom and tells you that it is an Aberdeen Angus, you have gained useful knowledge. If your teacher then tells you that the cow exists, nothing new has been added to the subject. If somebody bursts into a room and shouts out, 'it exists', 'exists' tells you nothing at all about the nature of 'it'.

23

Draft

Kant's example was to invite you to imagine 100 Thalers (a coin used in his day).

If you are imagining something like this, you can describe the predicates of Thalers (they are round, metallic, possibly gold, have an image of the king, and so on), and each new predicate adds to our concept of the Thalers. But if you then say, 'Oh, and by the way, the Thalers exist', nothing has been added: there is no difference between our concept of 100 Thalers and our concept of 100 Thalers that exist.

Now apply this to Anselm's concept of God.

Anselm tells us that God is the greatest conceivable being, so we can imagine God with all the predicates that Descartes lists, and each predicate: omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, and so on, adds to our concept of God. But if I then say, 'Oh, and by the way, God exists', nothing has been added: there is no difference between our concept of God and our concept of a God that exists. Moreover, the only way I can know that Thalers really do exist is to experience them: to touch, smell, see and even taste them, and to hear them if I drop them on the floor. Equally, the only way I can know that God exists is by sense experience. Logic alone gets me nowhere.

Objection 2: We can accept the proposition that 'existing necessarily' is part of what we mean by 'God', but it does not follow from this that God exists in reality.

We will put this into an understandable sequence. If any of the words confuse you, go back to the definitions of terms at the start of this section.

1 Anselm's Ontological Argument in effect claims that the proposition 'God exists necessarily' is **analytic** – in other words, that it is true by definition.

2 Think, for example, of the statement that 'A bachelor is an unmarried man'. This is obviously analytic – true by definition – because that's how we define a bachelor.

Think further, for example, of the statement that 'A unicorn is a horse with a horn'. This is also obviously analytic / true by definition, because that's how we define a unicorn.

3 Now take the two following propositions:

- bachelors exist
- unicorns exist.

How do we know that there are any bachelors? The answer can only be: 'by experiencing them'. If you have an unmarried male in your family of marriageable age, then clearly 'bachelors exist' is true, because you've seen one.

Now try it with unicorns. How do you know that there really are any unicorns? When did you last see, touch, taste, smell or hear a unicorn? People claim to have seen them, but those claims have never been substantiated. Perhaps at some point in the future somebody will indeed find unicorns; but the obvious point is that this will only happen by sense experience: it can never happen by logic.

4 Now turn your attention to the proposition 'God exists necessarily', which Anselm claims is analytic / true by definition. It follows from 3, above, that I can only know that there is a God by experiencing God

▲ A Prussian Thaler from the time of Kant

Key terms

analytic statements / propositions that are true by the meaning of the words used. For example, 'A bicycle has two wheels' is analytic because by definition a bicycle is a two-wheeled vehicle. In short, analytic statements are true by definition.

Component 1   Philosophy of religion and ethics

24

© Hodder Education

through my senses. Some people do indeed claim to have experienced God, and this may be true or it may be false; but in either case it is a matter of experience and not of logic.

5 To make this as clear as possible:

'A unicorn is a horse with a horn' is logically true because that's how we define a unicorn, but it does not follow that there really are any unicorns.

Equally, 'God exists necessarily' is logically true, because that's how we define God, but it does not follow that there really is a God.

6 Clearer still:

The Ontological Argument fails because it omits one small but powerful word: 'If'.

With unicorns: *If* there are unicorns, then they will be horses with horns.

With God: *If* there is a God, then God will exist necessarily.

The strengths and weaknesses of Anselm's Ontological Argument

Strengths

1 It is a deductive argument, so if it succeeds, it is a proof of the existence of God. Put another way, unlike other arguments for God's existence, such as the design and Cosmological Arguments, it does not depend on anything we observe, and since human observation is not always reliable, that can be seen as a good thing.

In the debate about the Design Argument, for example, it is very difficult to decide whether the appearance of order that we observe in the universe is really the result of design or not. With the Ontological Argument, there is no ambiguity – the argument either succeeds or fails by its logic.

2 The argument can be taken in a different way, namely the interpretation put upon it by Karl Barth, who claimed that Anselm never intended the argument to be a proof of God's existence. Instead, Barth argued that it was the result of a religious experience given to Anselm in which God revealed his nature as:

' ... that than which nothing greater can be conceived ... '

In other words, for those with faith, the Ontological Argument is clearly true, because it is an expression of their faith.

We shall assess Barth's argument in the following section on the value of Anselm's argument for religious faith.

3 There is no doubt that the Ontological Argument is a good training ground for learning about the difference between analytic and **synthetic** propositions, necessary and contingent beings, and so on. In other words it is useful in the art of learning how to do philosophy!

Key term

synthetic synthetic statements / propositions are those whose truth or falsity are determined by sense experience.

Weaknesses

1 Although there are several scholars who still defend the Ontological Argument, notably Alvin Plantinga, the majority of scholars reject it, largely on the basis of the two major objections made by Kant, that:

- Existence is not a predicate: to say that something exists, such as, 'Cows exist', tells you nothing about cows that you have not found out from sense experience.
- Even if 'existing necessarily' is part of what we mean by God, it does not follow that God exists in reality. From what we said above about unicorns and God, Kant's objections seem to defeat the Ontological Argument.

You should bear in mind that Kant's objections do not disprove the existence of God: they simply make it extremely unlikely that God's existence can be proved by logic.

2 The starting point of Anselm's argument is that God can be defined as:

'... that than which nothing greater can be conceived ... '

Some would argue, however, that any attempt to define God would be to limit God. Anything that can be classified and analysed can be understood by humans, and many Christians would argue that this is at best futile and at worst irreligious. Thomas Aquinas, the great Roman Catholic theologian, insisted that we do not know God's definition, so Anselm must be wrong.

You might want to question this, because to say that God is:

'... that than which nothing greater can be conceived ... '

is really to say that God has no limitation at all, and that this is indeed a concept that we can understand.

The status of Anselm's argument as a 'proof'

Think back to what we said about the status of the Design Argument as a proof of God's existence: the argument is **inductive**, so cannot be a proof of God, because all inductive arguments are probabilistic. Some people will observe design in the universe; others will not. The former will think that God is the most probable explanation; the latter will not.

Anselm's Ontological Argument, you will now have realised, is a completely different way of arguing.

- It is deductive rather than inductive. In a deductive argument, if the premises are true, then the truth of the conclusion is guaranteed.
- Unlike the Design Argument, it claims to be true without having to use any fallible sense experience, so is *a priori* rather than *a posteriori*.
- Anselm argues that 'God exists necessarily' is analytic – it is true by definition / logically true.
- So, if the premises of Anselm's argument are true, then it is a proof of the existence of God.

> **Key terms**
>
> **inductive** argument which is probabilistic, because the truth of its conclusion cannot be guaranteed by the truth of its premises.
>
> ***a posteriori*** arguments which depend on sense experience: think of 'posterior' – behind / after sense experience. For example, that 'oak trees grow from acorns' can only be known by sense experience and not by logic.

26

Is it a proof?

- This is disputed, because various scholars claim that the argument works, including Anselm and Descartes, although most argue that it does not.
- For most scholars, Kant's objections show that the argument is not a proof: it merely shows that 'If' God exists, then he exists necessarily.
- Compare the 'proof' of Anselm's argument with mathematical proof, for example, that 2 + 2 = 4. Nobody doubts that 2 + 2 = 4, but lots of people doubt that Anselm's Ontological Argument is true. If it was really a proof, there would be no doubt.
- Some might argue that it is a proof in Karl Barth's sense, as a faith-based acceptance.

The value of Anselm's argument for religious faith

1 Karl Barth's view is that Anselm's argument is about faith, not logic.

In looking at the strengths of Anselm's argument, we did refer to Karl Barth's interpretation of the argument as a religious experience given by God to Anselm.

> ### Karl Barth (1886–1968)
>
> Barth was a Swiss Protestant theologian. He was emphatically opposed to the liberal Protestantism of his time, primarily since it seemed bent on interpreting the message of Jesus in line with modern culture, whereas Barth insisted that the only allegiance of the Church should be to God (and especially not to the likes of Adolf Hitler).
>
> Barth insisted that God can only be known by revelation, and not by logic, and this led him to have a novel approach to Anselm's Ontological Argument. In 1931, Barth wrote a book on Anselm called, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, in which he claimed that Anselm's argument was never intended to be a logical proof of the existence of God. Rather, and as you can see by the title of his book, Barth saw the Ontological Argument as a way for faith to seek understanding. In other words, according to Barth, Anselm used the Ontological Argument as a way of trying to understand the God he believed in.

Barth's argument in brief:

- At the end of Chapter 1 of the *Proslogium*, Anselm says:

  'I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this too I believe: that unless I believe, I shall not understand.' (Note 7)

In other words, for Anselm, belief in God comes before reasoning about God.

- Thus Anselm began with a prayer, praying that God would reveal himself to his understanding.
- Moreover, God revealed a name to Anselm:

  ' ... that than which nothing greater can be conceived.'

Anselm's definition of God, according to Barth, was not based on logic – it was given to him by a religious revelation.

- You can see Barth's point if this understanding of Anselm is right: if humans could prove the existence of God purely by logic, then we would not need God's revelation, and God himself could be just another object of human knowledge.

Against Barth's interpretation:

- Anselm's *Proslogium* is a prayer directed towards the 'fool' in Psalm 14:4, who says that there is no God. In other words, the prayer is directed at an atheist. If his Ontological Argument is not intended to be a logical proof to convince the atheist, then why does he go to so much trouble to demonstrate the truth of the argument?
- In the preface to the *Proslogium*, Anselm mentions that he is looking for a proof; not that he is merely reinforcing some kind of religious revelation.
- Perhaps the most convincing argument against Barth is that Gaunilo bothers to respond to it. To make that clear: if Anselm was just telling people about his faith in God, why would Gaunilo object to that? Gaunilo objects to Anselm's argument precisely because he thinks it *is* a logical 'proof' that fails, so Gaunilo is telling him why he fails. Moreover, Anselm then responds by telling Gaunilo that only God has necessary existence. In other words, they are having an argument about logic, and not a discussion about faith.

2 **To some extent Anselm's Ontological Argument has value for those who believe in God already,** since perhaps they are more likely to accept it as a logical proof.

3 **Bear in mind, however, that many fideist Christians disagree with this last point.**

Fideism is the view that faith does not depend on reason, so if faith points one way and reason points another, then the fideist is justified in following what they believe. Fideists might therefore reject any attempt to 'contain' God within a system of logic. They would argue that if we could prove God's existence by logic, then faith would lose all of its value: we would not need faith in God if we could show logically that God must exist.

4 To give Anselm the last word, although Anselm is seeking for a logical proof of God's existence, this is not an attempt to replace faith with logic, despite Barth's claims. Faith for Anselm is a volitional state (an act of the will) motivated by love of God:

'… and a drive to act as God wills …'

So 'faith seeking understanding', which is Anselm's 'motto' in the *Proslogium*, means something like:

'… an active love of God seeking a deeper knowledge of God.' **(Note 8)**

Summary of Anselm's Ontological Argument

For a start, remember the technical terms and how they define the argument:

- *a priori* and *a posteriori*
- inductive and deductive
- synthetic and analytic
- subject and predicate
- necessary and contingent.

1 The basis of the argument in thought

The Ontological Argument is based on the claim that God's existence can be deduced from his definition: once God is correctly defined, there can be no doubt that he exists. Using the list of technical terms above:

- The Ontological Argument claims that the proposition, 'God exists' is *a priori* / deductive – you do not need sense experience to know that it is true: you know it is true just by thinking about it.
- In the proposition, 'God exists', the subject 'God' contains the predicate 'exists', so God must exist. It's as clear as knowing that 'bicycles' (subject) 'have two wheels' (predicate).
- God's existence is a necessary truth, not a contingent one.

2 Anselm's *a priori* Ontological Argument and criticism from Gaunilo

Anselm's Ontological Argument from Proslogium 2:

Use the shortened form of the argument as a basis for remembering the whole:

P1 God is the greatest conceivable being.

P2 It is greater to exist in reality than to exist only in the mind.

C Therefore, as the greatest conceivable being, God must exist in reality.

Now add the bits about fools and painters and you've got it!

Criticism by Gaunilo: *On behalf of the Fool*:

This uses a parody of Anselm's argument to show that it is absurd:

P1 It is possible to conceive of the most perfect and real lost island.

P2 It is greater to exist in reality than to exist only in the mind.

C Therefore the most perfect and real lost island must exist in reality.

So Gaunilo is saying that the real fool would be anybody who argued in this way (e.g. Anselm!)

Anselm's reply to Gaunilo from Proslogium 3 and the Responsio:

P1 To be perfect, an island would have to be 'that island than which no greater can be conceived'.

P2 An island than which no greater can be conceived would have to exist necessarily, since a contingent island would be less perfect than an island that existed necessarily.

P3 But islands are contingent and by definition no contingent thing can exist necessarily.

C Therefore that which can be conceived not to exist is not God.

Further:

P1 God is the greatest conceivable being.

P2 The greatest conceivable being cannot be conceived not to exist.

C1 Therefore, God, and God alone, possesses necessary existence: God cannot not exist.

*In summary, Anselm gives a clear refutation of Gaunilo's 'perfect lost island' argument. He shows that **necessary existence is a predicate only of God**, and **not of things**.*

Anselm's response to Gaunilo seems very powerful, but it is hard to see how Anselm would have replied to Kant's objections, given here, which most scholars think defeat Anselm's argument.

3 Criticism from Kant

Objection 1: Existence is not a predicate

- Kant attacks Descartes' Ontological Argument, that as the supremely perfect being, God must possess all the perfect predicates, such as omnipotence and omniscience and perfect (i.e. necessary) existence.
- But existence is not a real predicate (think 'Thalers' and think 'it exists'), so if we list all of God's predicates (omnipotence, omniscience, and so on) and then add 'existence', we add nothing to the concept of God. The only way I can know that Thalers exist is to experience them; so the only way I can know that God exists is by sense experience, not logic.

Objection 2: We can accept that 'necessary existence' is part of what we mean by 'God', but it does not follow from this that God exists in reality

- Think 'unicorn'. 'A unicorn is a horse with a horn' is logically true, because that's how we define a unicorn, but it does not follow from this that there really are any unicorns.
- Equally, 'God exists necessarily' is logically true, because that's how we define God, but it does not follow that there really is a God.
- Think 'if': If there are unicorns, then they will be horses with horns. If there is a God, then God will exist necessarily

4   **Strengths and weaknesses of Anselm's Ontological Argument**

Strengths

- The argument is deductive, so if it works, it is a proof.
- Not only that, according to Karl Barth and others, the argument succeeds precisely because it is not meant to be a logical proof: it's a confession of faith. For those with faith, the Ontological Argument is clear to their faith.
- The Ontological Argument is a good training ground in learning how to do philosophy!

Weaknesses

- Most agree that Kant's two objections defeat all Ontological Arguments. They do not disprove the existence of God, but they do show that God's existence cannot be shown by logic.
- Some reject Anselm's definition of God as 'the greatest conceivable being', but Christians such as Aquinas would reject any attempt to define God, because if we were able to define God that would limit him. Against that, some would say that Anselm's definition is a good place to start and we know what it means.

5   **The status of Anselm's argument as a 'proof'**

- Here you should contrast the deductive / *a priori* Ontological Argument with inductive / *a posteriori* arguments (like the Design Argument).
- Inductive arguments can only be probability arguments, but the deductive Ontological Argument is a proof if we agree that the argument works.

- The Ontological Argument does not seem to work, since most agree that Kant's objections defeat it; moreover it does not have the status of a mathematical proof, where the truth of 2 + 2 = 4 is obvious to everyone. If the Ontological Argument was really a proof, there would be no argument about the Ontological Argument either.
- You might want to argue that it is a 'proof' in Barth's sense – that it is obvious to faith.

6   **The value of Anselm's argument for religious faith**

i   This is primarily about Barth's interpretation of Anselm's argument, that:
  - It is cast in the form of a prayer rather than a logical proof.
  - It is based on a religious experience in which God revealed a name to Anselm:

' … that than which nothing greater can be conceived.'

  - If we could prove God's existence by logic, there would be no need for faith or for trust in God.
  Nevertheless:
  - Anselm's prayer is directed towards the atheist 'fool' in Psalm 14:4. If the argument is not intended to give an atheist a logical proof of God's existence, why does Anselm go to so much trouble to show that his argument is right?
  - In the preface to the *Proslogium*, Anselm says that he is looking for a proof.
  - Why else would he bother to respond to Gaunilo? Gaunilo constructs a reply to Anselm's logic and Anselm replies in kind: they are arguing about logic, not about faith.
  - For Anselm, 'faith seeking understanding' means:

' … an active love of God seeking a deeper knowledge of God.'

ii   The argument has value for those who believe in God already, since they are more likely to accept it as a logical proof.
iii   But many Christians disagree about the last point: fideists would argue that if we could prove God's existence by logic, faith would lose all of its value.

Three suggestions for practice and development

Use one or more of these three questions / claims as a homework assignment, a class essay, or as a focus for practice.

1   Explain why Christians have differing attitudes towards Anselm's Ontological Argument.

2   Explain what it means to say:

   a that the Ontological Argument is *a priori* / deductive
   b that in the proposition: 'God exists', the subject 'God' contains the predicate 'exists'
   c that God's existence is a necessary truth.

3   'Anselm's Ontological Argument proves nothing.' How far do you agree?