

Anselm's ontological argument: an *a priori* proof of God's existence?

A statement is *a priori* = one can see that it is true using pure reason and given an understanding of the meanings of the words in it. We don't need empirical evidence to know that it's true. *A priori* statements seem to be true *necessarily*.

A statement is *a posteriori* = our evidence for its truth is empirical, or based on data that we receive *via* sense experience.

Some examples of *a priori* statements:

- A bachelor is an unmarried male.
- $2 + 2 = 4$
- The Pythagorean theorem in geometry.
- If a is identical to b and b is identical to c, then a is identical to c.

Some examples of *a posteriori* statements:

- The Earth revolves around the Sun.
- Lemons taste sour.
- All crows are black.
- All bodies with mass are attracted to others bodies with mass by the force of gravity.

-- To say that a statement is *a priori* is *not* to say that the concepts used to make it are innate (i.e. that we are born with them in our head, that we didn't have to learn them).

Anselm's ontological argument alleges that "God exists" is a statement that, if we are thinking clearly and understand the definition of "God," we can know to be true *a priori*. Compare Anselm's argument to Paley's design argument for God's existence. How, according to Paley, can I know that God exists? Answer: from the order (g) to be found in living things like the eye. How do I know that this order exists? Answer: by means of sense experience. So according to Paley's design argument, our knowledge that God exists is *a posteriori*.

Anselm's argument can be paraphrased as follows:

1. God, by definition, is the greatest possible being.
 2. A being that does not exist in the real world is less great than a being that exists necessarily, or in all possible worlds.
 3. Suppose that God (the greatest possible being) does not exist in the real world.
 4. If the greatest possible being does not exist in the real world, then He is not as great as the possible being who is just like him but who does exist in the real world.
 5. But the greatest possible being *can't* be less great than some other possible being.
- To say that "the being than which none greater is possible is a being than which a greater is possible" is to say something that's necessarily false, because *self-contradictory*.

6. The supposition in 3 is false. God does exist in the real world. And he exists not contingently, but necessarily, or in all possible worlds. It is impossible for God not to exist.

Anselm's argument has the form of a "reductio ad absurdum":

Suppose not P.

If not P, then Q and not Q.

Not (Q and not Q).

P.

Some comments about Anselm's argument:

-- Definitions tell you what properties a thing must possess to fit the definition, not whether anything that actually exists does fit it. The definition of "unicorn" is "horse-like creature with horn on its head; can be ridden only by virgins; possesses certain magical powers;" You could agree that that is the correct definition yet still think that unicorns don't exist. Similarly, premise #1 only states a definition of "God." Even an atheist could agree that it's the correct definition. (Or as Anselm would put it: the atheist only denies that God exists "in reality." The atheist admits that God exists "in the understanding.")

-- Note the Anselm does not define God as the "greatest actually existing being." Rather, he defines God as the "greatest possible being."

-- The 2nd premise says that a being that exists in all possible worlds is greater than one that exists in none or only some. Anselm takes it for granted that we know how to rank things in terms of how much "greatness" or "perfection" they possess. He also takes it for granted that if a merely possible *x* becomes an actually existing *x*, then its greatness has increased. Anselm no doubt believes that this is something we know *a priori*.

-- A necessary being exists in all possible worlds, a contingent being exists in the actual world (which is one possible world), an impossible being (e.g. a round square) exists in none. The actual world includes everything there is, past, present, and future, here on Earth or anywhere else. Actual world = everything that's real. If you think that there really is a God, but that there really is no Santa, then you think that the actual world includes God but not Santa. If you think that there is one odd number between 2 and 4, then you are committed to an existence claim: this number exists. If the existence claims in math are necessary truths, then the mathematical entities in question exist in all possible worlds.

-- Gaunilo's objection to Anselm's argument: If the ontological argument could successfully prove *a priori* the existence of God, then a corresponding argument would successfully prove *a priori* the existence of "the perfect island." But it's absurd to think that one can prove *a priori* the existence of any islands, perfect or imperfect. So Anselm's proof of God's existence must be flawed.

-- Sober's objection to Anselm's argument is that we need to distinguish two different claims:

- i) In order for something to be God, it must be an existing thing. Only an existing thing could be God.
- ii) Some existing thing is God.

Anselm's mistake is to think that ii) necessarily follows from i). But it doesn't. If the definition of God that Anselm assumes is correct, and if premise #2 in the argument is true, then i) does follow. But that doesn't mean that ii) is true. And to prove God's existence, Anselm needs to prove ii).