

Introduction to Philosophy

Proving the Existence of God: The Ontological Proof of God's Existence

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Readings

- Saint Anselm, "The Ontological Argument".
- William L. Rowe, "The Ontological Argument".

Background

Of the many traditional arguments for God's existence, only the ontological argument is supposed to be completely independent of experience. It was famously formulated by St. Anselm in the eleventh century and has since been defended by many influential philosophers. According to this argument, the very concept of God (or the definition of the word "God") entails that God must exist. If the argument is correct, anyone who has an idea of God has conclusive rational grounds for believing that God exists. William Rowe's essay sets forth Anselm's argument clearly step-by-step (including steps that are only implicit in Anselm's own formulation) and then summarizes two of the most popular objections to the argument. Rowe concludes that the ontological argument is defective but that it is nevertheless a "work of genius" that raises important philosophical questions.

Questions

1. Saint Anselm provides two similar arguments for the claim that "something than which a greater cannot be conceived undoubtedly . . . exists in reality". What premises does Anselm assume in order to justify this claim and how do they entail it? Why must this "something than which a greater cannot be conceived" be God and not something (someone?) else?
2. What arguments do Gaunilo and Immanuel Kant make against Anselm's argument? Why is William Rowe not satisfied with either of these arguments?
3. Given that they reach different conclusions, Anselm, Gaunilo, and Kant cannot all be right. Where exactly in their respective arguments do they disagree? Which position is supported by the strongest and most compelling argument?