

Book Review

Goldschmidt, Tyron, *Ontological Arguments*¹

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In 2018, Cambridge University Press launched an innovative new series called Cambridge Elements in the Philosophy of Religion. This series contains a collection of truly short (approximately 75-page) monographs on concentrated topics related to the philosophy of religion. Because the books are so concise, they make for great teaching material and can be mixed and matched to form the primary curriculum for a philosophy of religion course. Because the books are singularly focused, they also make contributions to advanced scholarship in their sub-field. This is an exciting series for scholars and students alike who wish to explore topics such as theism, pantheism, the role of prayer, theories of the afterlife, practical applications of religion, the relationship between faith and reason, etc.

An excellent piece from the Elements in Philosophy of Religion series is Tyron Goldschmidt's *Ontological Arguments*. Goldschmidt's book offers an introductory yet comprehensive study of the origins, importance, historical development, and contemporary relevance of ontological arguments. First put forward by St. Anselm in the 11th century, the ontological argument is often considered to be the most paradoxical of all the proofs for the existence of God. In contrast to other arguments, such as the cosmological and design arguments, which rely on empirical evidence, the ontological argument is special in that it is, in Goldschmidt's words, an "armchair proof"² that attempts to demonstrate the existence of God from *a priori*, analytically necessary premises drawn solely from the definition of God. The author's primary conclusion is that although ontological arguments are not entirely convincing, it is nevertheless difficult to articulate what exactly is wrong with them. The inferential relationship between the premises and the conclusion of an ontological argument is so unusual and perplexing as to produce

¹ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 77pp.

² Tyron Goldschmidt, *Ontological Arguments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1.

significant historical and contemporary debates, even though we are often not persuaded by the conclusion of the argument.

One of the main innovations from Goldschmidt is his claim that there are actually many ontological arguments. Rather than one initial ontological argument from St. Anselm that has gone through slight revisions in the history of Western philosophy, Goldschmidt presents four separate ontological arguments from St. Anselm, Descartes, Plantinga, and Lowe (and also briefly outlines at the end of the book even more ontological arguments from A. D. Smith, Leibniz, Gödel, Gareth Mathews, and Lynne Rudder Backer.) Goldschmidt systematically treats each of these ontological arguments, first by restating the argument in premise-format, then by entertaining objections, while sometimes offering rebuttals to the objections, and finally by examining what works and does not work in each argument. To give an indication of how thorough Goldschmidt's argumentation analysis is, I will briefly explicate his treatment of St. Anselm in chapter 2 of the book.

Goldschmidt restates St. Anselm's initial version of the ontological argument by replacing the awkward phrase "that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-conceived" with the abbreviation "GOD":

1. "GOD" is understood. (Premise)
2. If "GOD" is understood, GOD exists in the understanding. (Premise)
3. Even if GOD exists only in the understanding, it can be conceived to exist in reality. (Premise)
4. GOD is greater if it exists in reality than if it exists only in the understanding. (Premise)
5. It is impossible to conceive of something greater than GOD. (Premise)
6. If GOD exists in the understanding, then GOD exists only in the understanding or in the understanding and in reality. (Premise)
7. Therefore, GOD exists in the understanding. (From 1 and 2)
8. Therefore, GOD exists only in the understanding or in the understanding and in reality. (From 6 and 7)
9. Therefore, GOD can be conceived to exist in reality. (From 3 and 7)

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10. Therefore, if GOD exists only in the understanding, then it is possible to conceive of something greater than GOD. (From 4 and 9)
11. Therefore, GOD does not exist only in the understanding. (From 5 and 10)
12. Therefore—drum roll!—GOD exists in reality. (From 8 and 10)³

Goldschmidt compares his own articulation of St. Anselm’s argument with the version put forward by Graham Oppy in the introduction to his 2018 edited volume *Ontological Arguments* and then uses this comparison to unpack the premises of the argument.⁴ At the heart of Goldschmidt’s analysis is a detailed examination of the potential weaknesses of each premise. As a proposed objection to premises 1 and 2, Goldschmidt discusses St. Anselm’s contemporary and critic, Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, who rejects the claim that GOD can be understood at all (10-11), thereby invoking a negative theological critical attitude. After presenting St. Anselm’s response to Gaunilo,⁵ Goldschmidt turns to what will become a major topic throughout the rest of his book, the question of the status of the term “existence.”⁶ What does it mean to distinguish existence in the understanding from existence in reality? Here, as a critical response to premise 3, Goldschmidt frames the distinction about existence in terms of Alexius Meinong’s (1853–1920) groundbreaking analytic work on the difference between existence and subsistence, a distinction which is crucial for debates about the ontological status of imagined and non-existent objects, and which is conceptually essential for St. Anselm’s distinction between GOD in the understanding and GOD in the real. Goldschmidt then turns to criticisms of premise 4—the attack from nihilism, which rejects intrinsic greatness—and then entertains the “parody objection,” Gaunilo’s “greatest island objection.” This leads Goldschmidt to explore further defenses and rebuttals, from St. Anselm’s initial response to Gaunilo in the *Proslogion*⁷ to Plantinga’s response.⁸ By the end of the chapter, readers are left with a truly comprehensive exposition of St. Anselm’s ontological argument, as well as a panorama of positive and negative voices, and most of the possible weak spots one could come up with, as well as a premonition of the consequences and ramifications that the argument will muster over the course of the next thousand years.

³ *Ibid.*, 7–8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8–10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11–15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

Goldschmidt's book continues along in a similar fashion, systematically exploring Descartes's ontological argument in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (chapter 3), Plantinga's modal ontological argument (chapter 4), and Lowe's ontological argument from "modesty" (chapter 5). Descartes revived St. Anselm's work by presenting a new ontological argument built around the definition of God as a perfect being. This led to a series of further consequences and objections in the modern period, most notably from Hume, who claims via the problem of induction that there is no way to demonstrate arguments *a priori*, since proof always requires experience and experience is always inductive.⁹ Kant's well-known objection to ontological arguments—that being cannot be a predicate—acts as a further response to Descartes's version of the argument.¹⁰

According to Goldschmidt, the next big innovation comes about in the 20th century with Plantinga's modal ontological argument. Plantinga distinguishes between necessary and contingent existence and puts forward a controversial premise from possibility: "there is some possible world where maximal greatness is instantiated."¹¹ As he does throughout the book, Goldschmidt's discussion of counterarguments and rebuttals is comprehensive and effective. In the subsequent chapter, Lowe's ontological argument from modesty emerges as one of the main responses to Plantinga. By reframing the ontological argument in terms of a distinction between abstract and concrete existence instead of necessity and contingency, Lowe's theory has the advantage of avoiding the controversial possibility premise. By the end of chapter 5, the reader is left with a portrait not only of the many insights and challenges Plantinga's and Lowe's modal arguments face, but also of some of the most interesting debates in contemporary analytic metaphysics today.

One of the virtues of Goldschmidt's book is that the author accounts in such a skillful way for many different historical and contemporary voices within the tiny space of 75-pages. Nevertheless, some readers might feel that there are other voices that Goldschmidt should have included in his overview of the debate. For example, Goldschmidt's handling of ontological arguments post Kant is almost entirely analytic, as is his premise-format method throughout the book. Some readers might feel that a more balanced treatment of the topic would have included figures like Hegel and Heidegger, who have also, arguably, made major contributions to the subject. Along similar grounds, critics might also object that Goldschmidt's analysis is sometimes too narrowly focused on inferences and counterarguments, without setting

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30–34.

¹¹ 37.

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each particular ontological argument within the context of the philosophers' broader aims. For example, Goldschmidt treats Descartes's ontological argument as if it were divorced from the greater trajectory of the *Meditations*. It would have been effective if Goldschmidt had briefly engaged the larger goals of the *Meditations* by showing how Descartes makes use of the ontological argument—i.e., to demonstrate how the argument in the *Meditations* progresses from the indubitable existence of mind to the substance of body. These are nevertheless small objections to Goldschmidt's work, which in my opinion do not detract from the overall success of his book.

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References

Goldschmidt, Tyrone, *Ontological Arguments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).