On the Impossibility of Successful Ontological Arguments

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1. Ontological Arguments

Ontological arguments are arguments that purport to demonstrate the existence of God from a priori considerations. They are intended to provide a proof of God's existence on the basis of straightforward reasoning from indisputable premises. One characteristic feature of ontological arguments is that they are based on non-empirical grounds. If successful, an ontological argument would constitute a special case of proof of God's existence. Historically, ontological arguments come in several forms[1], the most ancient and well-known being that of St. Anselm. Descartes in his *Meditations*[2] has also provided an ontological argument, whose general trend is definitional. Lastly, it is worth mentioning Gödel's ontological argument, which has attracted recent interest, and modern variations by Norman Malcolm[3] and Alvin Plantinga[4].

For the sake of brevity, I will only sketch Anselm's and Descartes' ontological arguments. Anselm's conceptual ontological argument goes roughly as follows[5]. Begin with the concept of a being than which no greater can be conceived[6]. But if such a being does not exist, then a being than which no greater can be conceived and which in addition exists, can be conceived of. But this leads to outright contradiction, since the latter is a greater being than the former. Hence, a being than which no greater can be conceived exists.

Consider, second, Descartes' definitional ontological argument, which is very concise. It runs as follows. We can conceive of a being with every perfections. But existence is also a perfection. Hence, God exists. As Descartes points it out, this argument rests on the fact that existence is of the essence of God.

On the other hand, several objections have been pressed against ontological arguments. One major criticism emanates from Kant[7] who famously points out that ontological arguments rest on the implicit but false premise that existence is a predicate. On the other hand, ontological arguments are also regarded by most authors as inconclusive. For they seem insufficiently convincing to persuade a non-theist of God's existence.

In what follows, I shall present a novel, as far I can see, objection to ontological arguments. This objection does not concern one specific form of ontological argument, nor does it address one specific premise or inference in ontological arguments. Rather, the present argument aims at showing that ontological arguments in general, given the intrinsic nature of their conclusion, are of an impossible nature. The argument entails that conclusive ontological arguments would contradict the very nature of God. In short, it leads to the conclusion that no ontological argument can be successful.

2. A General Objection to Successful Ontological Arguments

The argument for the impossibility of successful ontological arguments can be sketched informally as follows. Begin, on the one hand, with the consideration that God is a perfect being and, on the other hand, with the fact that humans are imperfect beings. God, as a perfect being, aims at maximising all human qualities. But if we had a successful ontological argument, then faith would be unnecessary. Hence, we would fail to develop this last quality. And this would contradict the aforementioned fact that God aims at maximising the development of human qualities.

At this step, it is worth analysing the argument in more detail:

(1)	God is a perfect being	Premise
(2)	humans are imperfect beings	Premise
(3)	faith is a human quality	Premise
(4)	a sound ontological argument is a special case of proof of God's existence	Premise
(5)	a perfect being aims at maximising the development of human qualities	From (1)
(6)	God aims at maximising the development of all human qualities	From (1) and (5)
(7)	if we had a proof of God's existence	Hypothesis
(8)	then faith would be unnecessary	From (7)
(9)	then we would fail to develop faith	From (8)
(10)	then we would fail to develop one human quality	From (3) and (9)

(11)	then God would have not maximised the development of human qualities	From (10)
(12)	then God would not be a perfect being	From (11)
(13)	∴ if we had a proof of God's existence then God would not be a perfect being	From (7) and (12)
(14)	∴ if we had a sound ontological argument then God would not be a perfect being	From (4) and (13)

It should be noted that the above argument has the general form of a reductio ad absurdum. It starts with the hypothesis that we have a proof of God's existence at our disposal and derives a contradiction with the fact that God is a perfect being. An immediate consequence of the argument is that ontological arguments fail. For if a sound ontological argument was available, it would contradict the fact that God has all of the perfections. Thus, the availability of a successful ontological argument would be in contradiction with the very nature of God.

At this step, it is worth mentioning briefly some characteristic features of the above argument. It should be emphasised, first, that the argument rests on a specific property of our physical world. In effect, our present world allows for the development of faith, since no proof of God's existence is currently available. This constitutes an empirical fact. It should be added that premise (2) is also based on empirical data. For the evidence that humans are not perfect beings is currently available. The current argument appears thus, to the difference of ontological arguments, based[8] on empirical facts.

It should be observed, second, that the argument contrasts the perfect nature of God and the imperfect nature of human beings. In effect, premise (1) states the perfect nature of God and premise (2) underlines the imperfect nature of human beings. More generally, the argument emphasises the relationships of God and humankind.

Lastly, it is worth defining accurately the scope of the current argument. The argument is for the impossibility of a sound ontological argument. It concerns ontological arguments intended in the classical sense, considered as a special case of *proof* of God's existence. What the argument entails is the impossibility for an ontological argument to provide a definitive proof of God's existence, namely a line of reasoning yielding certainty. But what the argument does not deny is the possibility allowed to ontological argument to simply increase[9] one's faith or to strengthen one's initial belief in God's existence. In conclusion, the above argument leaves room for a form of ontological arguments that would only produce a shift in one's prior subjective probability concerning the existence of God[10].

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[1] For a taxonomy of ontological arguments, see notably Oppy (1995, 1996).

[2] *Fifth* meditation.

[3] Cf. Malcolm (1960).

[4] Cf. Plantinga (1974).

[5] From Anselm's *Proslogion* (chapters 2 and 3).

[6] *Aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit.*

[7] In his *Critique of Pure Reason.*

[8] At least partly, since premises (1) and (4) notably result from a priori considerations.

[9] Without yielding certainty.

[10] I thank Graham Oppy and Christopher Small for very useful comments on an earlier draft.