

A Few Thoughts on the Ontological Argument to a Budding Young Philosopher

by Brendon Sykes

WHY WE LIKE IT:

If you can't remember the many nights you stayed up arguing about the Ontological Argument into the wee hours with a case of 24 or some good Colombian what the heck were doing in university? Every generation since Anselm has taken a swipe at this philosophical equivalent to Rubric's Cube and nobody, except maybe Kant, could ever claim something close to refutation. Anyway, we liked Sykes's impudent, even brazen kick against 'one of the cornerstones of empiricism' and since it was directed towards a 'budding young philosopher', we hope the dude learned from it. And that's a truth a greater than which does not exist!

Editor's Note: We originally published Syke's essay in Issue 2. He undertook some revisions so we're republishing it because he owes Charles money and he wants to do everything he can to make sure the dude pays it back.

Per Stefano, il mio amico italiano,

Che fai di bello, raga? Io spero stia bene. Ho letto il tuo saggio, quindi alcune cose...

You write: Anselm's Ontological Argument (hereafter OA) is as follows:

- 1. If God exists only in understanding, then we can think of a greater God.*
- 2. We can't think of a being greater than God.*
- 3. Therefore, God cannot exist only in the understanding.*
- 4. Either God exists in reality and the understanding or God exists only in the understanding.*

5. *Therefore, God exists in reality.*

I think this argument is reasonable with respect to Anselm's definitions of God and greatest. The definitions support the argument. The argument is also valid because it takes the form of modus tollens. Because it is modus tollens, it is a valid argument.

Stefano, the OA logically proves the premise set out by Anselm but this proof does not constitute validation of God's existence. Most of the objections to the argument lie outside the boundaries of *modus tollens* and logic. In effect, whatever the argument (as it is formulated) proves, it fails to convince. Bertrand Russell famously said of the OA, 'Probably the best way to deal with it is to forget it.'

A few of the problems to consider...

You write:...God, by definition, means the being than which nothing greater (or more perfect)can be thought. Nothing imagined can be greater than God. ...The next important phrase...is what it means to exist in understanding. What this means is that if someone understands a concept then that person has an understanding of that idea....Another important thing to consider is that existence in reality is greater than existence in understanding...

Anselm argues that a God that exists in both understanding and reality is greater than a God that exists only in understanding. But that 'reality,' his real existence, is exactly what we are setting out to prove. So it's like he's already made him 'real' before he proves him 'real'. This, in effect, begs the question. A number of philosophers have taken up this line of rebuttal.

God's essence doesn't prove his existence. We can assign essences and properties to all manner of imaginary things and this in no way necessitates their existence in reality (time and space). Essence, here, is the fundamental 'is-ness' of something—what makes an apple an apple and nothing else and that no other thing other than an apple is an apple because of that essence. It's sort of like the unique genetic blueprint of an apple. But where does essence become existence? The apple exists or it doesn't exist? How are these two possibilities related, specifically, to its essence?

Anselm treats God's existence as a predicate but as you know, Kant famously challenged this assumption by asking 'can existence *be* a predicate?' A predicate here means a property of something. He suggests that it cannot. For example in the sentence 'The bicycle is red', red is a property or predicate of bicycle. But is the same true in the sentence 'The bicycle is red and it exists.'? 'Exist' here does not relate to the bicycle in the same way. To talk about 'a red bicycle' assumes the existence of a red bicycle in at least some capacity—either the understanding or the understanding plus time and space (reality). It's absurd to say 'the red bicycle exists'. We say 'the red bicycle' because its existence is already assumed. Its existence is *a priori*. We couldn't point to the bicycle or have such an object of reference, if this were not the case.

Anselm's use of 'great' as in 'none greater of which one can conceive' also raises problems. 'Greatness' is subjective. What is great for one is not great for the other and though we can both agree on the meaning of the word great, its application to objects within our experience (objects in the world) is

variable and this includes concepts of God(s). For example, in Christianity greatness includes kindness, forgiveness, love of God, compassion, faith etc. All of these are 'good', that is great, qualities. On the flip side, in Tantric Hinduism, the greatness of the goddess Kali (Durga) is measured by how ferocious, cruel and bloodthirsty her demands. Kali is considered Hinduism's greatest female deity.

You write: One standard objection to Anselm's argument is that perfection doesn't require existence. What this means is that by definition if X is a perfection then X is the highest degree of a property, that it comes in degrees and is good to have. But in logic existence is not a property...the fact that something exists doesn't enhance our concept of the thing...So regarding Anselm's argument, perfection doesn't require God to exist in reality....

This is another sore point: his use of perfection. (God is that of which a more perfect being cannot exist). This has generated a lot of comment. Is perfection a property of God's or any existence? He must exist because if He did not He would be less perfect than a being who did exist. But, again, is there a necessary connection between perfection and existence? In fact, it could be argued (if playfully) that the opposite is more likely to be encountered. Take an apple. Does the perfect apple exist? And is its perfection the reason why it exists? Must it be perfect to exist? And how do you account for blemished or imperfect apples which certainly exist?

Also, how could a perfect being—a more perfect of which cannot be conceived, a more perfect of which there is none—create an imperfect world? He is, by Anselm's own definition, less perfect than a perfect being that creates a perfect world (and therefore, by the terms of his argument, should, in fact, *not* exist). And if not, then the idea of his existence is *redundant*. In the perfect world, in the perfect universe where nothing is imperfect, God becomes unnecessary. In a perfect world, would there be a need for God? We don't live in such a world, of course, and maybe that's why Voltaire said, 'If God didn't exist we would have to invent Him.' But if that is the case, does this mean God's very existence is an invention of Man? If so, he exists *only* in the understanding and not in time and space. Or if He *does* exist independently in time and space He is a different God from the one that owes His existence to human invention.

I found your final paragraph the most interesting one in your paper. You write: 'I *believe* (in God's existence) *because of my personal beliefs and what I was taught as a child.*' Belief is a mental construct that by virtue of its nature resists inquiry. In some respects, it throws a roadblock into philosophical investigations. Belief is black and white; philosophy is a universe of grays. Sometimes it confronts us with prickly issues that make us uncomfortable because they call into question ideas or beliefs we hold fundamentally dear. It's the job of philosophy to ask those questions. And while your statement of what you believe is your special privilege and understandable in context, it's not philosophically sound. It is a declaration of faith that is not open to investigation.

With regard to your metaphor of a painting—you have to be careful when you step out of topic and address something you may not be altogether familiar with. This has nothing to do with logic and everything to do, empirically and historically, with sense data. You write: *Before an artist draws or paints a picture, he/she has an image of it in their mind. Then he/she actually draws it so now it exists. I think*

that people would feel that the actual painting is greater than having the understanding of the concept of that image. But this very notion has been challenged. In the late 1970's an art movement emerged in New York (mostly) called Conceptual Art. It argued that the 'idea' or 'thought' behind the work of art *was* the work of art. So you have an idea of a painting in your head. Once you do, according to Conceptualism, *that* is the actual art work. To then paint or sculpt what you thought is redundant and mechanical. So this challenges the very idea of existing in the understanding and existing in both understanding and reality. To the Conceptual artist, existence in understanding IS the artwork and its existence in reality is unnecessary. Sort of a back flip of Anselm's criteria for existence. This is why much Conceptual art consists only of ideas scribbled onto a page or instructions for making the painting/sculpture by a person other than the artist himself. If you weren't aware of this movement in art—and there are similar examples in literature and music—you would not think to challenge your statement. As I mentioned above, sometimes you have to step out of the tight boundaries of deductive reasoning and approach the philosophical problem in other ways: appeal to art 'in the world', empiricism, metaphysics etc...

...I like your curious mind, Stefano. Keep reading. Keep thinking. Thinking is, after all, the second most important thing you can do in life. The most important thing is to understand thinking isn't important.

Va bene, e' tutto. Abbi cura di te stesso e ci vediamo la prossima settimana...Il migliori saluti alla tua famiglia.

Ciao,

Brendon

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I came. I saw. I came again.

BIO:

Brendon Sykes not only questions the big stuff in philosophy, he also questions his own existence. Last summer, he realized a milestone in self-revelation. 'I drink, therefore I am.'

