

## **Imperfect Argument for the Existence of a Perfect God**

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In the 11th century, St. Anselm was archbishop of Canterbury in England. He endeavoured to form a logical and rational argument supporting the existence of God. His argument came to be called the ontological argument in support of God's existence.

Anselm based his thinking on reason and on the view that it would be absurd not to believe in God. In other words, in Anselm's view, the position of the atheist would be unreasonable or illogical. On the other hand, the religious believer's ideas would be clear, rational and logical and stand on their own merits.

Arguments that are similar to Anselm's are known in philosophy as "a priori arguments," which are thought to be so logical they need no additional supporting evidence. They stand on their own merits.

For example, if someone is taller than six feet they must also be taller than five feet. In philosophy such a priori statements do not require measurements or other physical devices to be confirmed as true. They are true because they are logical and rational.

Anselm believed the concept of God as a perfect being would be a concept that would not, and could not, be improved upon. Because of its perfection, his God-concept, if attained completely, was one wherein no better concept of God could exist.

He argued as well that the concept of a perfect God would, in order to be fully realized, include God's existence because a God that existed would be a more complete and perfect God than a God that did not exist. If and when religious believers could conceive of such a perfect God they would "know" it was absurd to entertain the idea that such a perfect and complete God did not exist and the position of the atheist would be irrational.

The religious believer's concept would be an *a priori* truth that needed no further evidence because the concept would be perfect and complete in itself. In Anselm's ontological argument once a person grasped the idea of a perfect God, the reality of the concept would be powerful and realistic without need for additional proof. No further evidence of God's existence of such a perfect God was needed because the concept itself was perfect and whole.

Anselm's ontological argument for God's existence is studied in theology and to a lesser extent in general philosophy. As expected, Anselm's ontological argument has its supporters and detractors. Here are some of the questions and issues raised by Anselm's ontological argument:

- It requires a concentrated effort and integrity for adherents to have a perfect concept of a perfect God.
- Would the same view of God be apparent to different believers so that those who needed no further personal proof or evidence of God could understand and accept and communicate harmoniously with other ontological believers?
- Is it true that if a perfect concept of God was achieved, it would be so obvious it needed no further evidence apart from the belief?
- The number of adherents who shared a perfect ontological concept of God would be much fewer than the number of regular believers in God.
- The theologian Gaunilo, a Benedictine monk and contemporary of Anselm, did not accept that the existence of God would be automatically implied even when the concept was perfect. This problem was also raised by the moral philosopher Immanuel Kant in his 18-century assessment of Anselm's ontological proof.
- The ontological concept of God is not considered by most theologians as among the best arguments for God's existence. It is more obscure and not as commonly accepted among regular religious adherents.
- Even the most conscientious believers in a perfect God may likely hold a variety of differing opinions — a fact that can be evident from the large number of world religions. An estimate of the total number of world religions is 4000 or more. Thus

the best concepts and most perfect ideas of a perfect God could, according to the ontological argument, result in many varieties of evidence supporting many different notions of a perfect God.

Modern day theological support for St. Anselm's ontological argument has been on the decline in the past century.

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