Philosophy of Religion

1. The Ontological Argument

Briefly summarise the Ontological Arguments of Anselm, Descartes, and Plantinga, and also explain the famous Kantian objection that "existence is not a predicate". How far, if at all, does that objection undermine the various arguments? Is any version of the Ontological Argument valid, and does any version succeed in proving the existence of God? If not, what is the principal objection to each of them?

1. Classic Sources

The following are available in many collections, e.g. Alvin Plantinga (ed.), *The Ontological Argument* (Macmillan, 1968), or John Hick & Arthur McGill (eds), *The Many-Faced Argument* (Macmillan, 1968):

Anselm, *Proslogion* chapters 2-4; Gaunilo, *In Behalf of the Fool*; Anselm, *Reply to Gaunilo*

Descartes, René, *Fifth Meditation* (and the relevant objections and replies)

Kant, Immanuel, "The Impossibility of an Ontological Proof of the Existence of God", in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Transcendental Dialectic, Book II, Chapter III, Section 4.

Plantinga's version of the argument is in his *The Nature of Necessity* (OUP, 1974), chapter 10, or *God, Freedom and Evil* (George Allen & Unwin, 1975), pp 85-112.

2. Critical Discussions

For most of the 20th century the Ontological Argument was treated dismissively, with the Kantian objection assumed to be decisive. For a defence of the argument against such complacent dismissal, see Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (OUP, second edition 1993), chapter 4. More recently there has been much greater interest in the variety of Ontological Arguments. Brian Leftow – former Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Oxford – discusses several of these in his chapter "The Ontological Argument" in William Wainwright, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (OUP, 2007). He argues, for example, that Anselm's original argument can work in a so-called "free" logic that allows reference without ontological commitment. Another defence of Anselm's argument is by Gareth Matthews, "The Ontological Argument", in William E. Mann (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwell, 2005), pp. 81-102. Peter Millican's "The One Fatal Flaw in Anselm's Argument", *Mind* 113 (2004), pp. 437-76 defends Anselm's argument from eight standard objections but identifies a crucial ambiguity which, he claims, undermines it. Millican presents this analysis more concisely in Chapter 1 of Graham Oppy (ed.), *Ontological Arguments* (CUP, 2018), also available from http://www.millican.org/papers/2018Anselm.pdf. Oppy's book is the most up-to-date and comprehensive collection of papers on the Ontological Argument. Chapters 3 and 5 – on Descartes and Kant (by Lawrence Noble and Lawrence Pasternack respectively) – are interpretatively focused, and hence less relevant here, but worth reading if you have a specific interest in Descartes and/or Kant. More relevant is Chapter 12, by Peter van Inwagen and entitled "Begging the Question": this discusses a crucial objection against Plantinga's modal version of the Ontological Argument. Leftow defends an Anselmian modal argument in *Anselm's Argument* (OUP, 2022), but this is a long book.

Concise critical discussions that attack several versions of the argument are by J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (OUP, 1982), chapter 3; Graham Oppy, "The Ontological Argument", chapter 8 of Paul Copan and Chad Meister (eds), *Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwell, 2008), pp. 112-26; and Peter Millican, "Logic: Atheism", at http://www.millican.org/papers/2019LogicAtheism.pdf (see pp. 94-101).

Yujin Nagasawa's *Maximal God: A New Defence of Perfect Being Theism* (OUP, 2017) defends the Anselmian argument against "Millican's Objection" (§§5.5-8, pp. 138-150), and provides a novel attempt to vindicate the key possibility premise in a Plantinga-style modal Ontological Argument (see §3.5, pp. 90-94; §4.5, pp. 116-120; and §7.4, pp. 202-5). Millican attacks both lines of thought, and goes on to propose a general objection to ontological arguments, in "Nagasawa's *Maximal God* and the Ontological Argument", *Religious Studies* (currently forthcoming in print, but available online since 4 Sept 2023), and at https://www.millican.org/papers/2023MaximalGod.pdf.

Peter Millican, Hertford College Oxford, October 2023