

Example Undergraduate Philosophy Essay

The Ontological Argument

The ontological argument in its variety of forms is an attempt to prove deductively the existence of a deity from a priori. Its most famous formulation was proposed by St Anselm in his Proslogian, and proceeds as follows. We define 'God' as that entity than which nothing greater can be conceived. This concept of God exists in our understanding at least, even the atheist (Anselm's 'fool') would acknowledge that he at least understands this. Therefore we can say that 'God' at least exists in one's mind, if not in reality. Anything that has real existence must be greater than that which only exists in our understanding. Therefore a 'God' that exists in our understanding alone cannot be that than which nothing greater could be conceived, as we can easily conceive of something greater, namely a 'God' that exists in reality. Therefore if we can conceive of something than which nothing greater can be conceived, which even the atheist acknowledges we can, then that thing must exist in reality, otherwise it wouldn't be that which nothing greater can be conceived, and thus we must conclude that 'God' exists in reality.

David Hume argued that nothing ('God' or otherwise) ever be proved by such a priori arguments. Hume argued that the only way to prove anything a priori is through an opposite contradiction, e.g. a square circle, as the resultant contradiction makes the thing inconceivable. It is impossible to comprehend anything not existing, as there is no contradiction in not existing. Thus it is inconceivable to imagine anything not existing. Therefore nothing can be proven to exist a priori, including 'God', as you can never show a contradiction in some things existence.