Ontological Arguments And Possibilities Of Giving The Reasons To Believe In God

The ontological argument as presented by Anselm and later Descartes, Leibniz, and Norman Malcolm does not, in my view, give good reasons to believe in the existence of God. However, the development of the argument by Alvin Plantinga could give us a good reason to believe in the existence of God, for, unlike his predecessors, he supposedly avoids presupposing that necessary existence is a perfection.

In what follows, I wish to give a survey of the argument beginning with Anselm, present some objections to the argument by Kant, and finally present Plantinga's version and show how it could avoid the problem of existence.

In the Proslogion, St. Anselm of Canterbury referred to God as “that than which nothing greater can be thought” (Hick, 23). He doesn’t mean spatially larger but greater in terms of being superior or perfect. But why must God be viewed in this way? Some have argued that we must hold God in this way for he is the “adequate object of religious attitudes” (Hick, 24). In order for God to be worshipful, he must be perfect and vice versa. But why not worship something limited? Because something limited is tainted with relativity and can therefore be dwarfed in thought by still mightier superiorities during which they lose their place in being the most worshipful (Hick,24). “Thus, our object of worshipfulness must have an unsurpassable supremacy and tower infinitely above all other objects” (Hick, 24).

In addition to worshipfulness, God must also cover not only the territory of the actual but of the possible such that his own existence must be inescapable in any circumstances. Moreover, to think of God as not existing is, for Anselm, self-contradictory (Hick, 25). Because He exists in the understanding (in our minds), Anselm holds that it follows that he exists also in reality, or actually which he thinks is imperative of such a being, namely, that he exists both in the understanding and in reality. This leap, if you will, from understanding to reality was questioned by many philosophers. But I think it would be most fruitful to concentrate on but one of them, namely Kant’s, since the contemporary versions all try either to avoid or provide an adequate response to his objections.

Kant avers that the ontological argument assumes something which is false, namely that ‘existence is a predicate. When I describe my dog Bisou, I say he is tri-colored and has brown almond eyes but I don’t say he exists. For Kant, existence is not a property but a precondition for having them; it is an implicit assumption when I begin to ascribe properties to Bisou. Thus, when one ascribes properties to a thing, he presupposes that the thing exists. Furthermore, under these conditions, existence is not perfection. One’s concept of existence must be rooted in experience thus it is not appropriate to suggest that because existence is a perfection, therefore God, the most perfect being, must exist. It cannot be predicated of God that He exists as if one were assigning attributes to Him, for existence doesn’t seem to add anything to it other than the fact that there are instances of it (Hick, 32).

Unlike Anselm (and later Descartes and Leibniz), Kant did not see ‘God exists’ or ‘necessary being’ - or existential propositions in general - as analytic statements. There is a sense in which

to assert that there is a being that is necessary is the same as saying that to deny its existence is a self-contradiction. Remember for Anselm only a fool would accept that “God, who must exist, does not exist” (Hick, 33). If this were the case, then, for Kant, it would mean that there is an analytic statement that is synthetically true, namely, God exists. But this, of course, he would deny for it is a logical impossibility that a synthetic proposition is analytically necessary. Let us consider the proposition ‘a triangle has three sides. Necessary analytic propositions like these are only necessary if they exist, that is to say if the geometrical figure exists it will have three angles. Moreover, such a proposition does not make the existence of a triangle necessary. He seems to conclude, then, that a necessary being is thus a contradiction.

One of the ontological arguments worth looking at in contemporary philosophy is Norman Malcolm's version. As a preliminary remark, he insisted that Anselm’s Proslogion has two different versions: The first is widely known in Proslogion II in that it was heavily debated by scholars in the middle ages and later rejected by Kant. The second is in Proslogion III where he coined it the “Modal Ontological Argument”.

In brief, he interprets Anselm as arguing that God must exist not simply because existence is perfection - and, thus, ultimately a great-making property. Rather, he affirms that the only necessary existence is perfection. That is to say, a being that exists necessarily is greater than one which merely exists. He was convinced that by making this distinction, he was able to avoid the Kantian objection which strongly argues against the idea that existence is a predicate, i.e., a property we can ascribe to subjects. Indeed, one might wonder what he means by simply existing versus existing by necessity. He explains this by positing the argument from a causation that if God is a being than which none greater can be conceived, he cannot come into existence for such a being would be limited, which by our grasp of such a being he is not (Hick, 52). If such is true, his existence, then, is impossible, but if he does exist he cannot have come into existence nor cease to exist because there would be nothing that could cause him not to exist nor could it just happen that he no longer exists via some external force (Davies, 310). Thus, he concludes, ‘God exists’ is either impossible or necessary; if God does exist, his existence must be necessary for it is impossible for him not to exist by necessity, i.e, his existence is impossible unless he exists necessarily.

I think it is worth noting two problems with this view. (i)Malcolm’s argument contains an implicit assumption. The assumption is that the concept of God is not self-contradictory. I don’t think he did enough to avoid Kant’s objection, namely that existence is not a predicate. Knowledge of a necessary being is beyond what we can experience and it would be impossible to come up with a definition strong enough to make it the subject of analysis. (ii)Also, assuming Kant is wrong and existence can be predicated of something thus making it a great-making property is it true that necessary existence is a perfection? Why is it that if God exists in all possible worlds, he is greater than if he were to exist only in the actual world (Murray & Rea, 129)?

Although some have found Malcolm's position unconvincing, it has been an insightful and useful take for further development of the ontological argument in the twentieth century. Chiefly among them is Alvin Plantinga's version which I think provides good reasons to believe in the existence of God. (Though I insist it is worth saying that by good reasons I am not suggesting that Plantinga settled the debate or has proven the existence of God but only that he has made significant progress in the development of the argument since Anselm. This, I believe, is doubtless).

Let us revisit the notion that existence is a great-making property (Davies, 342). That is to say, such a being would be greater if He exists in reality (actually) rather than just merely in the understanding (potentially). “He seems to suggest that a nonexistent being would be greater than in fact it is, if it did exist” (Davies, 342). But how does one make sense of this?

One way that Platingo begins to remedy this concern is by putting it in terms of possible worlds. That is to say, a description of the way the universe might be. An example could be the description of how the universe actually is. (Having said that, it is to be noted that this is not the only way philosophers think of possible worlds, in fact, it seems to me that most deny that they can consist of these types of descriptions and instead adhere to the notion that possible worlds are propositions or states of affairs. But for the purpose of efficiency and length, I will focus on Plantinga's solution which I think answers the question at hand in being a good reason to believe in the existence of God). Such a “description must be maximally comprehensive” (Murray & Rea, 131). In the actual world, things could have been otherwise, e.g., choosing to pick up a book rather than brushing your teeth. One can exist in more than one possible world, e.g., Cristiano Ronaldo exists in at least one possible world in which he is a football player, but he also exists in a world in which he is an engineer. He does not, however, exist in every possible world for his existence is contingent. However, “if something were to exist in every possible world, it would exist no matter how things went or how they turned out; such a being would be a necessary being” (Murray & Rea, 131).

Plantinga was critical of Malcolm's argument but offered an alternative. He holds that if Malcolm’s argument is able to prove the necessary existence of the greatest possible being, it seems to follow that such a being, which exists, in all possible worlds, and whose greatness in some worlds is unsurpassed. However, this doesn’t show that such a being has unsurpassed greatness in this world.

He resolves this problem by distinguishing between “greatness” and “excellence”. The latter depends only on its properties in a particular world; the former depends on its properties in all worlds. Thus, the greatest possible being, according to Plantinga, must possess maximal excellence in all possible worlds. The premises are as follows:

A being has maximal excellence in every world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in every world. (Davies, 351)

A being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every world. (Davies, 350)

If accepted, these premises affirm that maximal greatness entails existence in every possible world. A similar leap is taken to prove that a maximally great being exists: If a maximally great existing in some world X - assuming that the concept of a maximally great being is consistent - it follows that there is at least one world in which it exists. If it exists in one possible world, it exists in every possible world. And, if it exists in every possible world, then it exists in the actual world. Plantinga no longer needs the supposition that necessary existence is a perfection ”for obviously, a being can’t be omnipotent (or for that matter omniscient or morally perfect) in a given world unless it exists in that world. (Davies, 349). It is possible for every world to have a being with maximal excellence and therefore, such a being exists (Davies, 349).

But one might ask whether this argument is any good? Well, let us consider one objection. Is such a maximally great being possible? One could point out that omnipotence and moral

perfection are conflicting attributes, that is they are incompatible for if God is all-powerful he can do anything but if he is also morally perfect then there is at least one thing that he cannot do, namely, sin. Therefore such a being is impossible. Plantinga could respond by saying that there is no such worry. A maximally great being is only the greatest possible being, thus we have mistakenly described an impossible being. Perhaps a maximally great being includes only as much power an omnipotent being can have (Murray & Rea, 134). Thus, if we merely readjust the concept of a maximally great being so as to get rid of any impossibilities, such a problem would go away.

Plantinga's modal version of the ontological argument, in my view, successfully avoids presupposing that necessary existence is perfection because all that is required is that a maximally great being has certain attributes (or great-making properties), which can be readjusted should there be any incompatibilities amongst them, in a logically possible world. A being with maximal greatness will thus exist in every possible including the actual world.

Although it is not a perfect argument since it does not make conclusions based on empirical evidence, it does not strike me as a complete leap of faith granted if one were to accept his premises the conclusion would logically follow. But is mere validity enough to say this is a good reason? Not necessarily, but it would be without labor to mention that such a development of the argument is noteworthy and it doesn’t seem like it would warrant a paradigm shift though perhaps he has but steered the ship in the right direction, as it were, without knowing exactly where it will go.

To recap, I have given a survey of the argument beginning with Anselm, presented some objections to the argument by Kant, and finally presented Plantinga's version and showed how it could avoid the problem of existence.