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The Ontological Argument at a Glance

A-level Religious Studies
OCR H573/01 · Arguments based on reason

Sample factfile

IN A NUTSHELL **Can God's existence be proved from the concept of God alone? The ontological argument is a priori and deductive: if it works, God's existence is certain.**

1 Key terms

A priori
known by reason alone

Deductive
conclusion follows necessarily

Predicate
what is said about a subject

Necessary existence
cannot not exist

2 Anselm (Proslogion, 1077–78)

- God is "that than which nothing greater can be conceived"; even the fool of Psalm 14:1 understands this.
- Proslogion 2: existing in reality is greater than existing in the mind alone, so God exists in reality.
- Proslogion 3: God cannot be thought not to exist, so God exists necessarily.

3 Gaunilo and the reply

- On Behalf of the Fool: the same logic would prove a perfect "lost island" exists.
- Anselm: the argument applies only to a being that cannot be thought not to exist.
- Plantinga (1974): islands have no intrinsic maximum; God's qualities do.

4 Descartes (Meditation V, 1641)

- A supremely perfect being has all perfections; existence is a perfection, so God exists.
- Analogies: a triangle's angles; a mountain and a valley.

5 Kant (Critique of Pure Reason, 1781)

- "Being is obviously not a real predicate": a hundred real thalers are no more than a hundred imagined ones.
- Denying a triangle with its angles is no contradiction, so neither is denying God.
- Reply: Malcolm (1960): necessary existence is a genuine perfection.

6 Exam tip

Always say which version you are judging. Kant defeats Proslogion 2 more clearly than Proslogion 3.

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