The Ontological Argument

The Ontological Argument for a Perfect Being

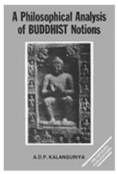
2026 Memorial Lecture for Prof. A.D.P. Kalansuriya

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Prof. A.D.P. Kalansuriya



- Made Assistant Lecturer at Peradeniya around 1964-5, went to UK for postgraduate training (as did at least four colleagues).
- Served at Peradeniya around 40 years, later as made Professor (Head of Department 1995-98).
- Published many books "outlining the history of Western Philosophy" in Sinhala. Published *A Philosophical Analysis of Buddhist Notions: The Buddha and Wittgenstein* in 1987 (and 2003, as *The Buddha's Discourse and Wittgenstein*).
  - Papers include: "Is the Buddhist Notion of 'Cause Necessitates Effect' Scientific?", *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 1 (1979), pp. 7-22.
  - Also: "The Buddha and Wittgenstein: A brief philosophical excursus", *Asian Philosophy* 3 (1993), pp. 103-111.

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Exploring Links Between Buddhism and Modern Western Philosophy

- Peradeniya University has been prominent not only through Kalansuriya, but notably K.N. Jayatilleke's *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (1963).
  - Jayatilleke (who had studied at Cambridge while Wittgenstein was still active, and also at London) promoted a "scientific" interpretation of Buddhist epistemology, identifying strong themes of *empiricism*.
  - Kalansuriya (who studied at Reading) disputed this style of interpretation, describing its advocates Jatatilleke and D. J. Kalupahana as "Buddhist modernists". He argued instead for a "salivific" interpretation of Buddhist notions, to be understood as operating within a Wittgensteinian "form of life".

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David Hume (1711-76)



- The most celebrated British empiricist, whose thought has some resonances with Buddhism:
  - Causation: We can only learn about things beyond our immediate memory and perception through causal relations, which are to be understood in terms of *constant conjunction* between cause and effect (thus setting the scene for Kalansuriya's 1979 paper).
  - Personal Identity: We have no notion of a persisting self as traditionally assumed in Christian thought; instead, our only legitimate notion of the self is as a "bundle of perceptions". Alison Gopnik has argued that Hume may have been influenced by Siamese Theravada Buddhism through the Jesuit missionary Charles François Dolu.

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Arguing for Perfection

- The Ontological Argument was first devised by Saint Anselm, Abbot of Bec in Normandy (and later Archbishop of Canterbury, 1093-1109).
- Though generally interpreted as arguing for the existence of a personal God who is *omniperfect* (omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect), similar reasoning could be used in favour of some more abstract types of perfect existence.
  - There may be slight hints of such an argument in the Pali canon at Udana 8.3: "There is, monks, an unborn – unbecome – unmade – unfabricated. If there were not that unborn – unbecome – unmade - unfabricated, there would not be the case that escape from the born – become – made – fabricated would be discerned."

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Buddhist Objections from Causation and Dependent Origination

- I understand that Dharmakīrti's epistemology (7th century) is built on a hard distinction between knowledge from *perception* (pratyakṣa) and from *inference* (anumāna), and he insists that genuine knowledge must ultimately be cashed out in terms of arthakriyā — causal efficacy, the ability of a thing to actually do something in the world.
  - On this basis, something's reality is evidenced by its ability to *produce causal effects*, so pure conceptual thought that characterises the Ontological Argument cannot succeed.
- I understand that Nāgārjuna (in the Madhyamaka) denies the possibility of intrinsic and independent existence :
  - "Whatever is dependently arisen, that is explained to be emptiness. … There does not exist anything that is not dependently arisen." (MMK chapter 24, verses 18-19)

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The Ontological Argument

Humean Echoes

"It seems to me, that the only objects of the abstract sciences or of demonstration are quantity and number, and that all attempts to extend this more perfect species of knowledge beyond these bounds are mere sophistry and illusion. …

All other enquiries of men regard only matter of fact and existence; and these are evidently incapable of demonstration. Whatever *is* may *not be*. No negation of a fact can involve a contradiction. The non-existence of any being, without exception, is as clear and distinct an idea as its existence. … The existence, therefore, of any being can only be proved by arguments from its cause or its effect; and these arguments are founded entirely on experience. … It is only experience, which teaches us the nature and bounds of cause and effect, and enables us to infer the existence of one object from that of another."

(Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, 12.27-29*)*

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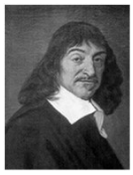
What is an "Ontological Argument"?



- Immanuel Kant gave this name to a type of argument for God's existence which …
  - Aims to be ***a priori:*** not depending on any ***empirical*** or ***a posteriori*** observation of how things are in the world.
  - Thus aims to prove God's existence to be ***necessarily true*** (as opposed to ***contingent***).
  - Starts from some sort of ***definition*** of what God is understood to be.

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René Descartes's Ontological Argument



- Put crudely, the argument (in his *Fifth Meditation*) goes like this:

  God is (by definition) a perfect being: a being possessing all perfections.

  Existence is a perfection.

  Therefore

  God exists.

- Most philosophers have thought this looks far too quick and easy to be plausible …

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Hume's Fork



- David Hume influentially divided potential items of knowledge into two distinct categories:
  - Relations of ideas
    - True in virtue of conceptual relations;
    - Knowable a priori, without appeal to experience;
    - Necessarily true – cannot be conceived to be false.
  - Matters of fact
    - Depend on facts about the world;
    - Cannot be known a priori, but only by experience;
    - Contingent – can be conceived to be true or false.

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Wielding Hume's Fork

- When Descartes says:

  "God is a perfect being",

  we ask: "is this claimed to be a relation of ideas, or a matter of fact?"

  - If it's a relation of ideas, then we should be suspicious of the claim that it can imply any "matter of fact and existence".
  - If it's a matter of fact, then we can ask for the empirical evidence on which it is based.

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The Parody Objection

- Pierre Gassendi objected that Descartes's method of reasoning – if we were to accept it – would lead to obviously ridiculous conclusions:

  Perfect Pegasus is (by definition) a perfect flying horse.

  Existence is a perfection.

  Therefore

  Perfect Pegasus exists.

- This parody indeed looks very implausible, but *where* exactly does the reasoning go wrong?

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The Ontological Argument

Kant's Diagnosis



- Kant famously objected "'existence' is obviously not a real predicate": we cannot categorise *types of thing* in terms of whether they exist or not.
- Indeed, in modern logic, we don't treat "God exists" as similar in form to "God is forgiving":

  "God is forgiving" has the logical form: Fg

  "God exists" has the logical form: $\exists x\,(Gx)$
  ("there is something which is a god", or in other words, something satisfies our definition of 'God')

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Referring to Concepts

- Suppose we all agree that:

  God, as understood by Christians, is omniperfect.

  using *omniperfect* to mean *omnipotent* (all-powerful), *omniscient* (perfectly wise), and *perfectly good*.
- Does it follow that *something* [i.e. God as understood by Christians] *is omniperfect, hence there is a God*?
  - Surely not! When we say "God, as understood by Christians", we're not purporting to refer to a divine being, but to *the Christian concept of God.*
  - When discussing the Ontological Argument, it is best to make very clear when we are talking about *concepts* rather than agreed *existent things*.

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- But when talking about concepts, we should clearly distinguish between two different kinds of properties that can be ascribed to them:
  - The *characteristic* or *internal* properties of a concept are *those in terms of which it is defined*. Thus the characteristic properties of the concept MONGREL are:
    {dog, mixed breed}

    These are the properties that make something a mongrel – any mongrel must have these properties. (But MONGREL itself is not a dog or of mixed breed!)
  - The *descriptive* or *external* properties of a concept are the *properties of the concept itself*. For example the concept MONGREL itself has the property:
    being thought of by me, right now

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Clarifying Kant's Insight

- Kant's principle that *existence is not a predicate* is best understood as saying that *existence is not a characteristic or defining property of a concept, but rather, it is a descriptive property*.
- To say that a mongrel exists is to say something about the concept MONGREL, namely, *that it is instantiated* (i.e. there is at least one *instance* of MONGREL, something *falling under* that concept).
- But then it follows that, *since being instantiated is not a defining quality of a concept, we can't just settle by definition that it is actually instantiated*. That has to be a question of fact, not definition.

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Challenging Descartes



"God is (by definition) a perfect being: a being possessing all perfections."

"I accept that your concept of God is the concept of a perfect being, so *if that concept is instantiated*, a perfect being exists. But you can't just include that it is instantiated in its definition."



"Why can't I? I hereby declare that my concept of God (by definition) includes all perfections, and is, besides, instantiated – there is such a thing."

"You are *begging the question* (i.e. taking for granted the very point that is under debate), because you've done nothing to show *that there is any concept which is both defined in terms of all perfections and instantiated. Only the characteristic (i.e. defining) properties of a concept can be fixed by definition*."

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Anselm's Argument



- God is understood as *that than which nothing greater can be conceived*.
- The Fool (of Psalm 14) understands this – and thus God exists *in the Fool's understanding* – but the Fool denies that God exists also in reality.
- If God did not exist in reality, then it would be possible to conceive of something greater (in virtue of also actually existing in reality).
- But this would be a contradiction, since it is not possible to conceive of something greater than *that than which nothing greater can be conceived.*

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The Ontological Argument

Proof by Contradiction
(*Reductio ad Absurdum*)

- God is defined as *that than which nothing greater can be conceived (TWNG)*. And obviously, nothing can conceivably be greater than *that than which nothing greater can be conceived*.
- Suppose that the Fool were correct in saying that God does not exist …
  - In that case, it would be possible to conceive of something – some really existing thing – that is greater than (the non-existent) God.
  - So something would then be greater than *that than which nothing greater can be conceived*.
- Since this is absurd – a contradiction – the Fool must be mistaken: God must exist.

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"Exists in the Understanding"

- Anselm seems to be suggesting that if

  That than which nothing greater can be conceived (TWNG) exists in the Fool's understanding

  then this means

  TWNG really exists (in the Fool's understanding)
- Clearly, the Fool should resist this, for example:

  "I'm happy to accept that 'TWNG exists in my understanding' *if this is just a way of saying that I understand the concept of TWNG*. But if that's all it's saying, then it doesn't imply *the genuine existence of something that really is TWNG*, either 'in my understanding' or anywhere else."

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Defeating the Contradiction

- If the atheist "Fool" is right, then there is nothing in existence – either in reality or in his understanding – *which actually instantiates the concept*: *that than which nothing greater can be conceived*.
- In that case, it seems that he can avoid the alleged contradiction. For then there is nothing which is at the same time:
  - that than which nothing greater can be conceived;

  and also:
  - something than which a greater can be conceived.

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Back to Concepts Again

- We previously rejected the move from:

  God, as understood by Christians, is omniperfect.

  to:

  Some really existing thing (namely, God, as understood by Christians) is omniperfect.
- We are now likewise rejecting the move from:

  That than which nothing greater can be thought exists in the Fool's understanding.

  to:

  That than which nothing greater can be thought really exists (in the Fool's understanding).
- As before, we are best avoiding such confusions by framing what we say in terms of *concepts*.

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An Anselmian Conceptual Argument

- It turns out that Anselm's argument can indeed be expressed in terms of concepts, so as to evade Kant's objection (and also various other common objections to Descartes's version).
  - Anselm sees a concept's greatness as measuring *both* the impressiveness of its defining properties (power, wisdom, goodness etc.) *and* whether or not it is instantiated (i.e. whether such a thing exists).
  - Let's assume, for simplicity, that instantiation is the overwhelmingly dominant criterion here.
  - Also assume that we can work out some numerical measure of a concept's definitional impressiveness.

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The 'Greatness' of a Concept

- So we're assuming that the greatness of a concept depends on four criteria:
  - Power
  - Wisdom
  - Goodness
  - Instantiation

  We assume that these three criteria can all be reduced to a single numerical measure of impressiveness.
- To simplify the logic, we assume that instantiation 'trumps' the other criteria (the *Principle of Superiority of Existence*).

The Ontological Argument

Five Example Concepts

(Colours: Instantiated, Uninstantiated, Uncertain)

LAIKA	{first dog to be sent into space}
LASSIE	{dog, catches villains, rescues victims, star of film and television}
AURELIUS	{Roman emperor, with absolute political power, wise, benevolent, and a notable Stoic philosopher}
ATHENA	{Greek goddess of wisdom, known as just, courageous, protector of cities, patron of heroes and crafts}
GOD	{omniperfect creator of the universe}

Scale of Power/Wisdom/Goodness

Scale of increasing power/wisdom/goodness →

***Modest** characteristics of power/wisdom/goodness*

***Impressive** characteristics of power/wisdom/goodness*

LAIKA LASSIE AURELIUS ATHENA GOD

Scale of Known Greatness

Scale of increasing greatness →

Non-instantiated concepts *('non-existent' types of thing)*

Instantiated concepts *('existent' types of thing)*

Modest Power/Wisdom/ Goodness	Impressive Power/Wisdom/ Goodness	Modest Power/Wisdom/ Goodness	Impressive Power/Wisdom/ Goodness
LASSIE	ATHENA	LAIKA	AURELIUS

Hierarchy of Greatness if there is *No* Omniperfect Creator

Scale of increasing greatness →

Non-Instantiated Concepts ***Instantiated Concepts***

LASSIE ATHENA GOD LAIKA AURELIUS

Hierarchy of Greatness if there is an Omniperfect Creator

Scale of increasing greatness →

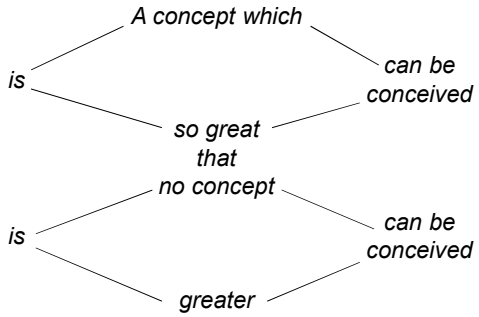
Non-Instantiated Concepts ***Instantiated Concepts***

LASSIE ATHENA LAIKA AURELIUS GOD

- So concept *A* is greater than concept *B* if:
  - *A* is <u>instantiated</u> and *B* is not <u>instantiated</u>
    or
  - *A* and *B* are <u>both instantiated</u> *and A*'s defined power/wisdom/goodness are greater than *B*'s
    or
  - *A* and *B* are <u>both uninstantiated</u> *and A*'s defined power/wisdom/goodness are greater than *B*'s
- But now it seems to follow that *the concept than which no greater concept can be conceived* must indeed be instantiated, and must also involve impressive power/wisdom/goodness – so does this argument prove God after all?

The Ontological Argument

Anselm's Crucial Ambiguity



1. "That concept which *is* so great that no conceivable concept *is* greater"

   = The *actually* greatest concept

   AURELIUS seems a good contender (assuming there are actually no gods or other superbeings)

2. "That concept which *can be conceived to be* so great than no concept could conceivably be greater (than it would then be)"

   = The *potentially* greatest concept

   GOD is indeed *potentially* greatest (and *would be* greatest if it were instantiated). But the Fool can consistently deny that it is actually instantiated.

3. "That concept which *is* so great that no concept could conceivably be greater"

   = The concept which is greatest *both* actually *and* potentially.

   To qualify for this description, a concept must actually reach a level of greatness that no concept could possibly exceed. Therefore, it would have to be an actually instantiated concept of an omniperfect being.

   So the Fool – an atheist – can consistently deny that the description succeeds in referring to any concept at all. For if God does not exist, then there is no such actually instantiated concept.

Alvin Plantinga's Argument (in non-technical form)



1. Define "God" as *a being which – if it exists – is necessarily existent and omniperfect*.
2. Assume that God, so defined, *possibly* exists.
3. Assume a logical framework called "S5", according to which what is *possibly necessary* is *necessary*.
   (This is based on the principle that what is possible or necessary is the same in all "possible worlds".)
4. From 1 and 2, God's existence is *possibly necessary*.
5. From 3 and 4, God's existence is *necessary*. Hence God exists not only *actually* but *necessarily*.

A Summary Answer to Plantinga

- Given Plantinga's logical framework and his definition of "God" at step 1, God's existence has to be either necessary or impossible – it cannot be contingent.
- Then why assume the former rather than the latter at step 2? This seems completely arbitrary.
- Consider the parallel argument defining a "Negasus" as *a being which – if it exists – is necessarily existent and a flying horse*. Exactly the same logic would apply!
- David Hume's principle (*Enquiry* 12.28) is plausible:



"Whatever *is* may *not be*. … The non-existence of any being, without exception, is as clear and distinct an idea as its existence" and therefore equally possible. So a *necessarily existent God* is as impossible as a *necessarily existent flying horse*.

Further Reading (https://www.millican.org/research.htm)

- For details of how this version of Anselm's argument evades numerous standard objections, making the ambiguity objection crucial, see "The One Fatal Flaw in Anselm's Argument", *Mind* 113 (2004), pp. 437-76.
- For a student-friendly discussion of the argument, see "Anselm", Chapter 1 in Graham Oppy (ed.), *Ontological Arguments* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2018), pp. 19-43.
- For an extensive reply to a recent prominent attempt to defend Anselm, see "Nagasawa's *Maximal God* and the Ontological Argument", *Religious Studies* 60 (2024). This also discusses the versions of Descartes and Plantinga, and ends with a general critique of such Ontological Arguments, aiming to show that they must all fail.