The Importance of the Ontological Argument

Good morning!... Thanks for coming today!... Based on the title of today's message, I expected to see an audience of no one! But, as Lewis Carroll said, in *Through the Looking Glass,* … "I wish I had eyes that good!" I note that this is the second message at the fellowship in the past four weeks about God!... Apparently, there is still hope for UUs!

I thank the Program Committee, particularly my friend and committee chair, Jim Black, for supporting my submission,…for understanding and appreciating that… *thought alone… about any idea … is important...*

I thank Brother Bob, for his always thoughtful service leadership. I note, however, that it also gives him yet another chance to ridicule me publicly…his second opportunity this year!... But he will not be replaced as my closest friend… *north of Baileys Harbor!*

I thank Jason, for your wonderful music. I know you will soon be retired. I also know that your 70th birthday was way back in January! So, under the chalice today is a belated birthday *and* early retirement gift! (Please be careful, however, because… like the chalice, it too is ignitable!)

Today's message is more philosophical than usual…But I hope that even if you are not philosophically inclined, you will find the history interesting…and it will open new areas of thought for you… Because my message is so heavily philosophically laden, I thought I should begin with a joke…to lighten your (heavy thinking) load!...

St. Anselm and a Unitarian walk into a bar. St. Anselm says, "I'll have a *proof* that God exists." The Unitarian says, "I'll have a beer."

The bartender asks each, "Why?" Anselm says, "Because God is that than which no greater can be conceived!" The Unitarian says, "Because beer is that than which no greater can be conceived!"

Anselm pauses, then asks the Unitarian: "O.K., fair enough, but can you *prove* that the beer exists?"… The Unitarian points to his glass… "Just empirically!"

(O.K., that's the best that ChatGPT could come up with given the prompts I gave it about my message today!)

I turn then to that message,…a message that addresses the most important *theological*…but what I believe is also the most important *philosophical* argument in the last 1,000 years in Western thought! (*Wow! This better be good!*) I will argue that the Ontological Argument raises important philosophical issues outside of theology… particularly in the domain of logic…and that takes us far beyond the obvious theological question of whether or not God exists….(which seems appropriate because this is, after all, a Unitarian Fellowship!) And that departure is important philosophically, opening a whole new perspective and analysis of progress within the discipline.

The Ontological Argument was first proposed by St. Anselm in the 11th century CE (in 1078 to be exact), as a proof for God's existence. It is *the classic* among arguments for the existence of God. It came after two previous and long debated (but unresolved) arguments about the existence of God in the Western tradition: the cosmological (the "before the fact" argument), and the

teleological (the "after the fact" argument). The first, the cosmological argument, claimed that God existed because there had to be a first cause, and God had to be that cause. This is a very old view, one embodied in the Old Testament, proclaiming God's creation of the universe, a story that goes back thousands of years. The argument was revived by Aristotle (in the 4th century BCE) with his argument for an Unmoved Mover. The cosmological argument is also the model for the current scientific view,… the Big Bang Theory,… the theory that says the universe had a beginning. This is a significant parallel and rare agreement between religion and science. But I note that there are more interesting models to explain the origin of the universe that do not posit a beginning. (That, however, is a message for another Sunday!)

I turn to the teleological argument,…the "after the fact" argument. It is attributable to St. Augustine of Hippo in the 4th century CE, when he argued for the existence of God because of the *results* of creation. We can know that God exists because of the properties of the creation. Just look at the universe. It is clearly designed. It follows laws, and this is the result of and proof for God's existence. William Paley revived the argument fourteen centuries later, in 1802, capturing the heart of the argument with his famous watch analogy. If you found a watch in the forest…its complex, interdependent parts would *immediately* point to an intelligent designer, not to random chance. Similarly, the universe is *organized complexity*, functioning for specific purposes, and must have a designer… *and that designer must be God.*

For centuries there were no alternatives to these two arguments. Either God created the universe, or God exhibited his presence through the design of the universe…. But what about the *idea of God?* … Maybe we need to focus not on cause or effect,… but on *the idea itself. This was a revolutionary idea!* It proposed that we could *think God into existence!* Not before the fact,… not

after the fact,… but "because of the fact" … bringing God into existence *by reason alone*… *existence ex nihilo*… *out of nothing,… except out of thought…*

Thus the Ontological Argument,…the argument that says we can know that God exists because we know that the being than whom no greater can be conceived must exist! Must exist because if it didn't exist, then there would be a being who was greater…namely, one that had all of the "God" properties… *plus existence*! (You know, the four "Big O" properties: Omnipotence, Omniscience, Omnipresence, and Omnibenevolence.) *This was a brilliant argument!* It did not rely upon a beginning. It did not rely upon a result. It was based solely upon the "idea of God" …independent of any evidence.

Now, I am not a believer,…but I must admit that as a philosopher I am impressed! This was and is a significant methodological move. Big! Bold! Exciting! It changed the playing field. It took us beyond the realm of cause (i.e., creation) and effect (i.e., design). It shifted the debate to a question about just an idea...the *idea of God*,… an idea that was not a product of creation or consequence. It said that *thought alone was sufficient for a proof*,… something more powerful and more important than evidence. This is something even a non-believer could and should get excited about…dare I say,…*worship*…for its sheer genius! Let's hear the argument in Anselm's own words, in the "*Proslogion,*" …

"[Even a] fool, when he hears of … a being than which nothing greater can be conceived … understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding.… And assuredly that than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater… Therefore, if that that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the understanding alone, the very being than which nothing greater can be conceived is one than which a greater can

be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality."

(*This is profound, regardless of your religious persuasion!)*

But wherein lies the importance of the Ontological Argument? Wherein the profundity that I am claiming? I will now develop a theory that the Ontological Argument is important because of its *logic and not its theology*. This will be demonstrated by looking at the objections to the argument,… some old, some new. Along the way, we will look at two other conceptions of God, also driven by objection to the Ontological Argument. Broadly, I will argue that what history shows is that we can make philosophical progress through bold, conjectural arguments (like Anselm's Ontological Argument) *because* those arguments are *faulty*. And that that progress can be and is outside the intent and content of the original argument.

The first criticism of Anselm's Ontological Argument came from one of his contemporaries, the monk, Gaunilo. He argued that if Anselm was right, then we should also be prepared to accept that the greatest of *everything* existed! Gaunilo argued for the Perfect Island, the island *than which no greater could be conceived*. (Some say it's Washington Island!... I think it's Grand Cayman!) In short, Gaunilo argued that the Ontological Argument was valid,… but that it *proved too much*. It demonstrated that the greatest of everything must also exist. … a far cry from reality, given all of the *imperfection* in the world!

This was not a criticism about the content of the argument, what the argument was about, what it was designed to demonstrate. After all, Gaunilo was a Catholic monk! This was about the *logic* of the argument! *That there can be arguments that prove too much!* But how? And what kind of criticism is that? Based upon what standards? *Good questions!* But these are questions of logic,

about what we should accept as rational argument.… They are not questions about God! … (*You see where this is going!)* The needle shifted from theology to logic…and the shift came from within the history of theology itself! Fast forward two hundred years.

In the 13th century, St. Thomas Aquinas (a member of the "triple A" theology farm team: "Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas"!) argued that the problem with Anselm's Ontological Argument was that the idea of God he presented was not universal. This does not say that the argument is invalid, rather that it is not *sound*….that one of its premises is false,… namely the one that says that we all share the same conception and understanding of God,… as "the being than whom no greater can be conceived." This led to multiple new theories about the nature of God over the next three centuries. Two are of interest today because they are important to the history, but also illustrative of the process that I am claiming is important to advancing progress. The two new theories are those of Descartes and Spinoza. Each offered their own arguments for God… but more important, they argued for a fundamentally different *kind* of God….one with a different purpose in Descartes' case;…and one with a different identity in Spinoza's case.

Descartes's God was a *guarantor of truth*. Namely, a God who was not a deceiver. So, we could then, in confidence, *believe what we perceive*. In short, "God makes the world safe for sense experience"…because if he didn't, we could not know anything about the material world! This was interesting and important because it shifted the problem from ontology to epistemology. The argument was not about the existence of God *per se*, but about God *ensuring that our perceptions were veridical.* It was about the *purpose* of God.

Enter Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza's God <u>was</u> the universe,…identical with it. This was the first formal effort to identify God as not *outside*, but *inside* the universe…in fact, synonymous with it. It was theology applied to cosmology! …*I love Spinoza!...* He offered the ultimate rebuttal to

traditional Christian theology. Yes, God exists,…but no,…God is not divine. God is (and only is) everything that is! This is known as Pantheism. (The closest thing to a *religion* for non-believers!)

Both of these conceptions of God were a far cry from "the being than whom no greater can be conceived." And both were revolutionary. Descartes came to God through God's purpose,… Spinoza through God's nature. And both views were precipitated by Aquinas suggesting that there might be different conceptions of God other than that proposed by St. Anselm. If so, Anselm's argument was unsound…*which is a logical and not a theological claim*.

I turn then to one of the most interesting responses to St. Anselm, from the German philosopher, Leibniz, in the late 17th century. Leibniz argued, contrary to all others, and for the very first time,… that the Ontological Argument was actually *invalid! <u>This was a dramatic claim!</u>* And Leibniz thought he had a way to explain why the argument was invalid *and* how to rectify it. He argued that the argument was *invalid* because it was *incomplete* ... it was missing a premise. And because it was missing a premise, the argument *proved too little*. In logic we call arguments that are incomplete like this, *enthymemes*. (Philosophers love to name stuff! It keeps us in business!)

Leibniz began by arguing that Gaunilo was actually *right* when he assessed that the Ontological Argument showed that the greatest of everything must exist, that this was not a mistake in the reasoning! Leibniz claimed that it is true that the greatest of everything exists, because God created the universe and everything in it, and God would not create anything less than *the best of all possible worlds!* This is what makes God the greatest! But Leibniz also argued that we cannot *know* this… *unless we can <u>prove</u> that the concept of God is consistent*. …<u>That is the missing premise of the Ontological Argument</u>… A separate proof must be made that it is logically consistent that the being than whom no greater can be conceived,… that the being with the four "Big O" properties,… *<u>is a possible being!</u>* We need to reconcile whether God can make a stone

that he cannot lift, or can make a ladder he cannot climb, as you heard a few weeks ago, (i.e., how we can reconcile questions about the limits of God's Omnipotence); … whether God knows everything, thus knows what we will do next, and if so, then we are determined, and not free…(i.e., a question of the limits of God's Omniscience);… and whether God is everywhere all the time (i.e., Omnipresent—at all intersections of highways 42 & 57 in Door County, at the same time!); and, ultimately,… the *biggest O*,… whether God is *Omnibenevolent*, given all of the evil that exists in the world. Leibniz parlayed this into a whole new intellectual endeavor, what he called *Theodicy: the attempt to prove that the concept of God is consistent* … that there can be a being with the four "Big Os",…that such a being is *logically possible*,…that all propositions about God's powers *are consistent.*

This was itself revolutionary! Also brilliant, …in both concept and effort! But *it was driven by logic, not by theology!* It was about demonstrating the *consistency* of propositions about God's properties and the *validity* of arguments about his existence…*consistency* and *validity* being central tenets of logic,…not theology. Leibniz didn't quite pull it off! But there are still over 15,000 pages of his correspondence and 40,000 pages of his essays that have not been published! Time will tell if Leibniz had more to say on the subject!

Fast forward 100 years, to Immanuel Kant, another great German philosopher… who proposed a totally new and unique critique of Anselm's Ontological Argument. Kant argued that *existence is not a predicate*. What in the world does that mean?! Kant argued that existence is not something like a particular color that an object may or may not have. *Existence is a given!* We don't ask, "What color is the number two?" That question reveals what is called a *category mistake*. And Anselm's Ontological Argument commits a category mistake, because it assumes a property

(namely, *existence*) that objects must have in order to be objects, a property that cannot be added or subtracted from their nature. *And that assumption is a mistake of logic*.

This was a powerful critique of the Ontological Argument,…but it too was *one of logic… not one of theology*. In fact, it led Kant to argue that we cannot prove that God exists, and more important, that God must then be beyond human understanding… *because* we can't prove it. Furthermore, since God is beyond human comprehension…we must still believe that God exists because that belief is what makes life meaningful! (I shall leave discussion of <u>that</u> claim for another Sunday as well!) Back to the logic of the Ontological Argument!

Given the significant, important and logical move on Kant's part, what comes next? If existence is not a predicate, what is it? Enter the *First Order Predicate Calculus* in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The answer: *Existence is an operator over variables in sentences, a place holder for existential operation.* (O.K., O.K., this is the most difficult part of the philosophy cum logic lesson today!) But the idea is important. Let me explain. (*I know, you are on the edge of your seats!*) Enter Bertrand Russell in the early 20th century. Russell helped develop the First Order Predicate Calculus just mentioned and introduced the "Theory of Definite Descriptions." This theory showed that *any* "is" statement in *any* premise of *any* argument asserts the existence of something, and thus the premise that "God <u>*is*</u> the being than whom no greater can be conceived" in the Ontological Argument, a statement seemingly true by definition, … was a statement that *actually assumed that God exists… because it asserts it!* So, every version of the Ontological Argument was and must be <u>*question begging*</u>! All of them assuming the existence of what is supposed to be proven!... This led to a significant result,… the logical *icing on the cake,* so to speak. It led to: <u>*a proof that there cannot be a proof that God exists!*</u> In fact, it led to a proof that

nothing can be proven to exist! (*Talk about a proof that proves too much!*) This is logic in the extreme! But, enough for now. Where does all of this get us?

I have argued that the Ontological Argument was at least a *plausible* argument. It raised new problems. It led to new theories. It forced new criticisms. The point is that plausible but flawed arguments have importance…can be progressive. But not for the reasons their originators might have intended. But for reasons that take us outside and beyond the original intent and content of the argument. This is itself a bold new theory, one about *plausible but flawed arguments* and why they are and can be progressive, and why they need to be studied. It is my view that such research will lead to alternative views of progress in all intellectual disciplines…not just in philosophy, but in the sciences, in the other humanities, and even in modern theology. And that means serious consequences for our theories and understanding about the search for knowledge and standards for rational belief, … about what *a free and responsible search for truth and meaning* is all about. I have much more to say about all of that, but will forego it today… *God knows, you have suffered long enough!* … So, I close…

There have been many arguments for the existence of God in the Western tradition. But among the historical competitors, St. Anselm's Ontological Argument is far and away the most important. Important not because it is about God,… but important because it placed reason above evidence, and opened a Pandora's box about what counts as a *proof*,… *what counts as a rational argument*,…ultimately illustrating that *plausibility outweighs validity or soundness*. We should seek progress in all intellectual endeavors, …but not expect nor require finality…Flawed arguments are progressive precisely *because* they are flawed…and when those flaws are uncovered, they lead to new and progressive problems, solutions and criticisms. The Ontological Argument is an example,.. par excellence!

I leave it at that today… I thank you for your attention… I thank you for attending to and enduring a complex message. I look forward to the talkback…where, as always,… I will learn more from you than you will from me!