

DOCTRINE OF GOD

DIVINE ASECITY



² Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. ³ What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? ⁴ A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. ⁵ The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. ⁶ The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. ⁷ All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. ⁸ All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. ⁹ What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. ¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us. ¹¹ There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 (ESV)

The great wise King Solomon of Israel wrote these powerful words some 3,000 years ago. There is much that could be said from them, but one in particular rings forth for our present study: the impermanent every-changing nature of life. Man toils, man rests, a generation comes, a generation goes, the sun rises, and it sets, the winds blow to-and-fro, inventions and new ideas come and go, things will be, then are, then were. All of life is a vapor; it is perpetual evanescent "becoming." **Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)**, the great Russian novelist, mimicked these biblical words on the evanescence of life in his *A Confession (1882)* saying,

Today or tomorrow sickness and death will come (they had come already) to those I love or to me; nothing will remain but stench and worms. Sooner or later my affairs, whatever they may be, will be forgotten, and I shall not exist.... One can only live while one is intoxicated with life; as soon as one is sober it is impossible not to see that it is all a mere fraud and a stupid fraud!

We live life intoxicated on the prospects that everything that is will be as it always has. Life is an ever state of shifting "becoming" of "movement" from what is to what could be to what was. If you think about it, such an existence is inherent in all finite things. Everything that is experiences this perpetual change of becoming. And such becoming has inherent positive and negative relations. For example: we become older, we become wiser, we become wealthier, all the while we hold ever present potentials of becoming weaker, becoming foolish, becoming poor and so forth. This applies to all of Creation. Nothing is excluded. Rocks exist yet are in a state of perpetual becoming towards dust. Stars exist yet move towards a perpetual state of heat death. Plants and animals grow, bloom, flourish, reproduce, and then fade and die. Humans are born, then mature, marry, reproduce, flourish, retire, then fade. Even spiritual creatures, like angels and demons, had beginnings, they exist finitely, they don't know everything, and some of them will cease to be (as in demons being destroyed ultimately).

So, we see, without qualification, all finite creatures possess inherently in them the state of change. As Solomon put it, "All things are full of weariness" (v. 8). In a more philosophical way, **every BEING possesses within itself BECOMING**. Did you get that?

The state of "becoming" goes for every single classification of "being" there is.

The atomic beings. The plant beings. The animal beings. Human beings. Spiritual beings. All such beings are really in a state of becoming. But what of the Supreme Being? What of God? God is not like Creation. Categorically, unequivocally, without equal God is not like Creation, and He is not like Creation in one fundamental essential way: He has not A BEING because He is not A CREATURE.

So, when we say, "HUMAN being" and "SUPREME being" the difference is not in the qualifying adjectives "humanness or supremacy," it's in the word "being." It is not as if, when we say, "GOD," that we are somehow saying that the entity "God" is just a higher form of what we are; that He is just quantifiably different from us, or different by degree. Such a notion is a pagan and un-Christian idea – a highly anthropomorphic view of God that undermines His utter uniqueness.

Rather, when we come to the subject of GOD, we are dealing with an entity that is beyond mere degree. He does not fit the mold of a genus or a categorized system. He is not one "being" among many beings. Rather, classically understood **GOD IS PURE BEING.**

God as a pure being is "pure actuality" – which simply means He is not a being that possesses potential. Rather He just IS "ISNESS." So, this means that unlike all the rest of ephemeral Creation God is unqualifiable, pure, ultimate, existence. Now, what we are dealing with is that uniquely rich and awe inducing **attribute of God theologians call "divine aseity."**

This fancy theological term "aseity" comes from a Latin word meaning "by itself." It gets across this profound understanding that **GOD is self-existent** and has no potential to become something else or to cease being. "Aseity... is best understood as God's self-existence... and independence in will, purposes, and desires."¹ As A.W. Tozer put it simply, "**God is self-existent selfhood.**"²

Now before we go any further with this idea of ASEITY let us look at some biblical data, and then we shall turn our attention to trying to wrestle with this concept in a more theological and philosophical manner. So, let's get started!

¹ John Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), pg. 242

² A.W. Tozer, *The Attributes of God: A Journey Into the Father's Heart*, Vol. 1 (Camp Hill, PA: Wing Spread, 2003), pg. 118-120

BIBLICAL DATA ON ASEITY

There are many scriptures that talk about God as absolute. Let us break down the scriptures down into each of the following points:

(1) THE BIBLE SPEAKS OF GOD EXISTING BEFORE ALL THINGS AND ALL THINGS EXISTING THROUGH HIM: There are plenty of scriptures that speak of the idea that God is the uncreated Creator, the un-sustained Sustainer, to get across the idea of His self-existence:

- In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
Genesis 1:1 (ESV)
- “You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.
Nehemiah 9:6 (ESV)
- ¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.
John 1:1-3 (ESV)
- “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”
Revelation 4:11 (ESV)

(2) THE BIBLE SPEAKS OF GOD NOT NEEDING ANYTHING IN ORDER TO EXIST OR TO FEEL FULFILLED: Countless scriptures speak to the fact that God doesn’t need anything in order to exist:

- Who then is he who can stand before me?
¹¹ Who has first given to me, that I should repay him?
Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine.
Job 41:11 (ESV)
- ²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
Isaiah 40:28 (ESV)
- ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.
Acts 17:24-25 (ESV)
- ³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” ³⁵ “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”
Romans 11:33-35 (ESV)

(3) THE BIBLE SPEAKS OF GOD EXISTING IN A CATEGORICALLY DIFFERENT WAY COMPARABLE TO THE EXISTENCE OF CREATION: It is not enough to simply affirm that God exists. Many things exist – plants, animals, stars, amoebas, beauty, angels, prepositions. But everything finds its existence IN other things. But with God His existence is in a different category. He doesn't merely exist as A BEING, but He exists AS BEING. He IS Ultimate Reality. The Bible hints at this concept in several ways. Consider:

- ¹¹ But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” ¹² He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”
¹³ Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” ¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.
Exodus 3:11-15 (ESV)

- ¹⁸ To whom then will you liken God,
or what likeness compare with him?
¹⁹ An idol! A craftsman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold
and casts for it silver chains.
²⁰ He who is too impoverished for an offering
chooses wood that will not rot;
he seeks out a skillful craftsman
to set up an idol that will not move.
²¹ Do you not know? Do you not hear?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
²² It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to dwell in;
²³ who brings princes to nothing,
and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.
Isaiah 40:18-23 (ESV)

- ²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.
John 5:26-27 (ESV)

- For from him and through him and to him are all things.
Romans 11:35-36 (ESV)

- ⁸ Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. ⁹ But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?
Galatians 4:8-9 (ESV)

THINKING THROUGH DIVINE ASECITY

So, biblically speaking, what we have seen is that God is the eternal, uncreated, self-existent, self-sufficient Creator and Sustainer and Definer of all reality. He is not merely A Being among many but is categorically distinct from all other beings because He is existence, He is being, that sustains all other beings in their existence. In this sense, **God is unequivocally THE ULTIMATE REALITY**. Historically speaking this just is what has been meant in the theological and philosophical discussions by the terminology of “Ultimate Reality.”

(I) BRIEF HISTORICAL SURVEY ON THE QUEST FOR “THE ULTIMATE REALITY”

Now, I want to pause and make sure you understand something: This idea of God being the Ultimate self-existent Cause and Ground of all existence is not something simply thought up by Christian theologians. It isn't special pleading by Christian thinkers. Rather, this notion has been contemplated since the beginning of philosophical reflection on the nature of reality.³ Questions like: Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there change and permanence? Why do we exist? How should we live? What is our Ultimate destiny? All these questions are rooted in the fundamental quest to know what Ultimate Reality is about.

Going as far back as the 600s-500s B.C. we find a group of Greek philosophers known as the Pre-Socratics who struggled with understanding the nature of Ultimate Reality. They struggled with the concept of the **“ONE AND THE MANY”** (permanence and impermanence). How do things stay the same and change? Is there anything that is unchanging? Is Absolute Reality indivisible or divisible? Is it one or many? How can we recognize change and permanence? With such questions these thinkers sought to uncover what they called the **“ARCHE PRINCIPLE”** (Greek meaning “chief, beginning, or root”) or **“LOGOS”** (Greek meaning “principle of order” or “reason” or “word”) of all Reality – that transcendent Truth that would explain all other truths, that transcendent Unity that would explain all diversities.

There was a myriad of these Greek thinkers that had their ideas of what ultimate entity could explain all the unity and diversity in the world. One of the first was **Thales (624-546 B.C.)** who affirmed ultimate reality was **WATER**.⁴ Others affirmed that Ultimate Reality was “air” or “fire” or “earth.” **Anaximander (610-546 B.C.)**, a contemporary of Thales, affirmed that Ultimate Reality could not be earth, fire, air, or water – because none of these things could give rise to its opposite (fire can't create air can't create water can't create earth) – and instead affirmed that the Ultimate Reality was **an infinite, indefinite, unbounded substance (the aperiion)** that was not subject to age or decay.

This debate over THE ULTIMATE came to an impasse with two of the most notable pre-Socratics: Heraclitus and Parmenides.

Heraclitus (c. 535-475 B.C.) argued that Ultimate Reality is not fixed but just IS PURE FLUX. Everything is change. Everything is disunity or a composite of opposites or tensions. His famous phrase **“You cannot step into the same river twice”** gets across his understanding that everything is in a state of becoming. Just like the person stepping into a river is not the same person a moment before, so all of reality is in a state of eternal “flow” or “change.” Therefore, there are no definite fixed realities. There is no such thing as Pure Being, but instead all of reality can only be understood as eternal “becoming.”

Now **Parmenides (c. 510-430)**, a younger contemporary of Heraclitus, challenged this notion. He argued, **“Whatever is, is.”** What does this mean? It means that you cannot have becoming unless there is BEING itself. “Becoming” or “change” really isn't anything at all, Parmenides argued. How so? Because “becoming” is just a state between “being this” or “being that” but isn't itself really anything. BUT, Parmenides argued, there IS SOMETHING, the world around us, which means that BEING must exist, pure unchanging Ultimate Existence must exist. In

³ If you truly want to understand this idea of how human thought is groping for an Ultimate or Absolute, then consider reading some history of philosophy books. I recommend a few: Colin Brown, *Christianity and Western Thought: A History of Philosophers, Ideas, & Movements*, Volumes I-III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990); John Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy & Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2015). If you want something less dense and more accessible, then consider the slender yet concise volume from R.C. Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas: Understanding the Concepts that Shaped Our World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000). Most of the main ideas of the historical overview above is going to come from these texts unless otherwise specifically cited.

⁴ Thales conclusion sounds foolish to us but don't do knocking ol' Thales! Thales was a brilliant philosopher and was an engineering and mathematical genius, even going so far as to predict a solar eclipse TO THE DAY and hour it would happen, which was May 28, 585 B.C. (he isn't called the “Father of Philosophy” for nothing). That said, his idea that all Ultimate Reality was water was tied to the fact that water addressed the three great mysteries of the ancient sciences: (1) life, (2) motion, (3) being. So consider water: (1) life is inextricably linked to water, you can't have life without water, (2) water is hylozoistic, that is, it has the capacity of self-motion (we don't know if he had awareness of gravity, but give him the benefit of the doubt) without the need of outside forces, so it helps explain why motion and non-motion, and finally (3) water is the only entity that can express itself (it's being) absolutely yet in multiplicity – solid, liquid, and gas – without it losing what it actually is. This actually makes a lot of sense but still an imperfect solution to all other entities that are immaterial in existence.

other words, if there is “something” then there cannot be “non-being” or “nothing.” Why? Because if there ever was a state of non-being (just ever changing becoming), then there would have never been anything else because non-being (eternal becoming) doesn’t have the capacity to “become anything.” It is impossible. So, what does this mean? Parmenides argued that there must be PURE BEING for there to BE ANYTHING AT ALL. And this means that, for Parmenides, all “becoming” is really illusory because all “becoming” really isn’t anything at all. Something either IS or it ISN’T for Parmenides. It’s can’t be “between” beings. But “betweenness” isn’t anything.

So, the big impasse was this: IS ALL BEING OR ALL BECOMING? FOR WITHOUT BEING THERE CAN BE NO BECOMING, YET ALL THE WORLD WE SEE IS BECOMING. So, what was the solution to this? Enter Aristotle.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) argued that **for there to be becoming at all there has to be being itself**. For anything at all to have the POTENTIAL to be anything else it must first ACTUALLY be. So, everything has actuality and potentiality within its existence. Thus, Aristotle blended Heraclitus and Parmenides together. But it goes much further than this.

Aristotle observed that everything is changing. Everything we see is in a state of going from what it is to what it could be potentially. But such a chain of change, argues Aristotle, could not go on infinitely. Why? Because if everything was infinitely in a state of potential, then everything could be potentially anything, which is really to be nothing at all. But there is something, namely the world around us. So, what does this mean? It means there must be an entity that itself grounds all change but itself is unchanging. There must be something that is transcendentally, changelessly “Pure Actuality” or “Pure Being” with no becoming within it. And whatever that “something” is it must be uncaused (no cause outside or beyond it because if so then it has potential), it must be immaterial (no matter, for matter just is the pure potential to be any particular form of anything), and pure actuality (with no change). Such an entity, Aristotle argued, was the **“Prime Mover” or “Unmoved Mover.”**⁵ Therefore the Prime Mover or Unmoved Mover was the Ultimate Source of all change in existence.

The Prime Mover, for Aristotle, is the “Final Cause” of all existence – the teleos (goal, end) – that makes everything move towards its intended end. How does this Unmoved Mover cause change in the world? Aristotle argued “by being the greatest desired end of all things.” The Unmoved Mover moves everything else through being the ultimate object of desire. **But what is the nature of this Unmoved Mover?**⁶ What could be said about it? Well, for Aristotle, this Pure Actual Unmoved Mover must necessarily be:

- **eternal** (if in time then it would endure, which is change)
- **changeless** (if it could change then it has potential)
- **immaterial** (for if it were material it would potentially be different forms)
- **all-powerful [omnipotent]** (for it has the capacity to bring forth all other changes)
- **perfect or all-good** (because if it lacked perfect then this implies it doesn’t have the ability to fulfill its teleos or intended end)
- **mind/intelligence** (Why intelligent? Stick with me for a moment on this point. Whatever the Pure Actual is, it can’t be matter, because matter is just a base substratum of potential that finds its meaning through the form it takes. But the Pure Actual can’t just be a pure abstract form, because if the entity was just an abstraction, then it has no causal capacity to make anything relate to anything else. Abstractions (raw forms) do not have the capacity to do anything. For example: The concept/form MAN exists but “MANNES” doesn’t make anything happen at all. It just is. Likewise, the concept/form of MORTALITY exists, but again it doesn’t have casual power nor meaning without its relation to other things. So, **the Pure Actual must have causal capacity to make various forms relate to each other in meaningful ways**. Example: Socrates is a mortal man. That is holistically a meaningful statement. That statement is not physical, it is a propositional statement of thought. But within that statement of thought there exists various abstract forms that themselves exist: SOCRATES...MORTALITY...MAN. Socrates is a particular entity related to mortality, which is a form that can be actualized in various entities. Man is a form that is actualized in various particular men (matters). But what makes all of these abstractions relatable and meaningful in a complete way? The only thing that could answer

⁵ Consider these articles on Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover: <https://classicalwisdom.com/philosophy/unmoved-mover/>; <https://owlcation.com/humanities/The-Unmoved-Mover-in-Aristotles-Metaphysics>; <https://strangenotions.com/unmoved-doubters/>

⁶ This question is wonderfully addressed in Edward Feser’s chapter on the *Aristotelian Proof for God* in his book *Five Proofs for the Existence of God* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2015), pg. 29-37

this is that there is an **intentionality of relation that is made between these things**. But intention is only a product of thoughts which are products of thinkers. Therefore, the Pure Actual Unmoved Mover must be a thinking entity. It must be a MIND.)

So, from Aristotle, we get, through raw philosophical reflection, the understanding that Ultimate Reality is grounded in an Ultimate Unmoved Mover, and that Unmoved Mover is an eternal, changeless, immaterial, omnipotent, perfect, mind that created everything. That just IS to say what people mean by "GOD" in a very universalized sense.

Later Christian thinkers, from the **Patristic Period (100-400 A.D.)** to the **Medieval Scholastics (1100s-1500s A.D.)**, wrestled with the big ideas of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical thought on the nature of Ultimate Reality, eventually refining and baptizing it into biblical theology. They came to understand that the God of the Bible was the Ultimate Ground of all reality. A key component of difference among these thinkers comparable to the ancient Greeks however is that they believed that "GOD" was not an abstract realm (like Plato) or an Unmoved Mover (like Aristotle) but was the Creator and Sustainer of all existence that interacted with, loved, revealed, and came to save Mankind.

Also very important to understand is the fact that these medieval thinkers believed that Ultimate Reality was both ONE AND MANY, that Ultimate Reality was not abstract but relational, and did not need the World of Forms or the eternal generation of creatures in order for it to exist. Rather **Ultimate Reality was personal, or rather, tri-personal, and unbounded eternal loving relationship**.

(II) ANSELM AND THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

One medieval thinker **Saint Anselm (1033-1109)**, Archbishop of Canterbury (1093-1109), is worth noting for his work in understanding God as the Ultimate Reality.

Anselm wrote a meditative prayerful philosophical tract called the **Proslogium (1078)**, in which he argued that God is by definition **THE GREATEST CONCEIVABLE BEING**. He said it this way,

“We believe that you [oh God] are a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. Or is there no such nature, since the fool has said in his heart, there is no God? (Psalms xiv. 1). But, at any rate, this very fool, when he hears of this being of which I speak --a being than which nothing greater can be conceived --understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding; although he does not understand it to exist.

For, it is one thing for an object to be in the understanding, and another to understand that the object exists . . . Hence, even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For, when he hears of this, he understands it. And whatever is understood, exists in the 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, 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 doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.⁷

Anselm later meditated even further on the nature of God. If God exists, and God is the greatest conceivable being, then God, Anselm argued, cannot fail to exist. He said it like this,

God cannot be conceived not to exist. God is that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. That which can be conceived not to exist is not God.

AND it assuredly exists so truly, that it cannot be conceived not to exist. For, it is possible to conceive of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist; and this is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived not to exist, it is not that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this is an irreconcilable contradiction. There is, then, so truly a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist; and this being you are, O Lord, our God.⁸

So, Anselm argues that since God is by definition “that than which no greater thing can be thought” then it follows that **IF IT IS EVEN LOGICALLY POSSIBLE THAT GOD EXISTS, THEN GOD NECESSARILY EXISTS**. This is known as the **ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR GOD’S EXISTENCE** (ontology is the study of the nature and being of existence) and has been equally loved and hated by serious theological and philosophical thinkers since the time of Anselm. Put in a more formal logical way, it would look something like this,

⁷ Saint Anselm, *Proslogium*, Chapter 2, accessed from *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/anselm-proslogium.asp#CHAPTER%20XX>

⁸ Saint Anselm, *Proslogium*, Chapter 3, accessed from *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/anselm-proslogium.asp#CHAPTER%20XX>

VERSION 1 OF THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE

1. GOD IS BY DEFINITION A MAXIMALLY GREAT BEING
2. THE CONCEPT OF A MAXIMALLY GREAT BEING EXISTS IN THE MIND
3. BUT A BEING THAT EXISTS IN THE MIND AND REALITY IS ACTUALLY GREATER THAN A BEING THAT JUST EXISTS IN THE MIND ALONE
4. THUS, IF A MAXIMALLY GREAT BEING EXISTS JUST IN THE MIND, THEN A MAXIMALLY GREAT BEING IS NOT MAXIMALLY GREAT
5. BUT GOD IS BY DEFINITION A MAXIMALLY GREAT BEING
6. THEREFORE, GOD MUST EXIST NOT MERELY IN MY MIND BUT IN REALITY

There is another way of formalizing this argument that Anselm mentions. So, I will also mention the second version,

VERSION 2 OF THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE

1. GOD IS BY DEFINITION A MAXIMALLY GREAT BEING
2. THE CONCEPT OF A MAXIMALLY GREAT BEING IS EITHER IMPOSSIBLE OR NECESSARY, FOR TO BE A CONTINGENT MAXIMALLY GREAT BEING IS NOT MAXIMALLY GREAT
3. THE CONCEPT OF A MAXIMALLY GREAT BEING IS NOT IMPOSSIBLE, SINCE IT IS NEITHER NONSENSE NOR SELF-CONTRADICTORY
4. THEREFORE, THE MAXIMALLY GREAT BEING IS BY DEFINITION NECESSARY
5. THEREFORE, A NECESSARILY MAXIMALLY GREAT BEING EXISTS

The Ontological Argument was considered by Anselm to be the single purely rational knock-down argument to refute atheism and skepticism. Enemies of the argument see it as a "charming joke" or wishful thinking. I am not going to get into all the apologetical hustle and bustle over this argument.⁹ But I will address a few points of consideration.

Some skeptics and atheists are put off by Anselm's reasoning. They argue that defining God into existence could work with defining anything else into existence. In fact, a monk and contemporary of Anselm, a guy named **Gaunilo of Marmoutier (994-1083)**, said just as much even in Anselm's day. For example, skeptics will argue that they can conceive of **THE GREATEST CONCEIVABLE ISLAND** existing, therefore such an island **MUST EXIST!** Right? Doesn't work. Why? Because an island is, **BY DEFINITION**, contingent and has definable temporal features — it has water around it, it has limited resources, it comes into existence through plate tectonics, and so forth. So if you start defining an island as a non-contingent, non-temporal, uncaused, spaceless, timeless, all-powerful, island, then it is hard to be able to say "Yeah, that's an island!" The very concept or definitional framework of "island" becomes meaningless.

Some skeptics have said Anselm's reasoning would lead to the existence of all kinds of mythical entities. For example some skeptics and atheists have argued:

⁹ If you are interested then I commend to you the chapter on the ontological argument discussed by Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), pp. 185-206. Also consider the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on the argument, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/ont-arg/#H2>

ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF UNICORNS

1. I HAVE IN MY MIND THE MOST PERFECTLY EXISTENT UNICORN
2. THE CONCEPT OF A MOST PERFECTLY EXISTENT UNICORN EXISTS IN THE MIND
3. BUT A BEING THAT EXISTS IN THE MIND AND REALITY IS ACTUALLY GREATER THAN A BEING THAT JUST EXISTS IN THE MIND ALONE
4. THUS, IF A MOST PERFECT EXISTENT UNICORN EXISTS JUST IN THE MIND, THEN A MOST PERFECT UNICORN IS NOT MOST PERFECT
5. SO, FOR THE UNICORN TO EXIST BY DEFINITION PERFECTLY, IT MUST EXIST IN REALITY
6. THEREFORE, THE MOST PERFECT UNICORN EXISTS IN REALITY

This argument is pure silliness. It doesn't work. Is it possible a unicorn exists? Yes. Is there a possible state of affairs (a possible world) in which unicorns could exist? Yes. But is there a state of affairs in which a MAXIMALLY GREATEST CONCEIVABLE/ PERFECT UNICORN exists? No. Why? Because the unicorn could always have one more feather, it could always have one more magical power, and so forth. Furthermore a unicorn is by definition a creature, a contingent entity, that has physical spatial-temporal form, with magical powers, with hooves, that shoots rainbows out of its rear-end. The point is what the skeptic is doing is taking the WORD "unicorn" and applying to it all the "attributes/properties" of MAXIMAL GREATNESS and saying its still a unicorn.

In effect the skeptic is making the definition of a unicorn lose its meaning. A spaceless, timeless, immaterial, boundless, infinitely powerful, omniscient, Uncaused unicorn JUST IS NO LONGER WHAT ONE MEANS BY A UNICORN! You are just using combinations of words, which are descriptive of GOD (the SUPREME UNCAUSED CAUSE OF REALITY) and ascribing them to the unicorn.

The examples of a Maximally Great Island or Unicorn go to show the silliness of the arguments by skeptics and atheists against the understanding that a MAXIMALLY GREAT BEING exists. They are not successful in undermining the rational cohesiveness and logical structure of Anselm's argument.

So, Anselm stands as one of the greatest defenders of Christianity in the history of the Church. His position is as such:

IF IT IS EVEN POSSIBLE GOD EXISTS, THEN GOD EXISTS.

What a thought to contemplate!

(III) THE THEOLOGICAL WEIGHT OF GOD'S ASEITY

From the historical survey on the quest for Ultimate Reality and a brief look at Anselm's ontological argument, we come away with an understanding that God exists uniquely and wholly independent of everything else. We come to understand that God is the Ground of Being for all other being and becoming. That He is the Unmoved Mover that moves all else; that He is the Purely Actual Reality that has no need to change or alter.

To get all of this information across in a little more systematized manner consider briefly a comparison of CREATION to GOD:

CREATION	GOD
<p>1. IS INTERDEPENDENT – This means that everything that exists finds its bearings or identity or features in relation of other things around it</p> <p>2. IS POTENTIAL – This is a way of saying everything that exists seems to be "moving" or "changing" state, being, or identity over space and/or time</p> <p>3. IS CONTINGENT – This is a fancy way of saying that they are all reliant on other things for their existence and they do not have to exist. We can imagine states of affairs where things don't exist.</p>	<p>1. IS INDEPENDENT – This means God doesn't find his identity in relationship to other entities and neither does He rely on anything for His existence.</p> <p>2. IS ACTUALITY – This means God doesn't have any potential. God cannot grow, change, evolve, learn, or the like. God simply IS PURE ACTUALITY. Pure reality.</p> <p>3. IS NECESSARY – This means God cannot fail to exist. God cannot NOT be. He is Absolute and Ultimate.</p>

So when we say God is "a se" (self-existent) we are saying that God is PURE ACTUALITY, He *is* BEING, and He has no potential to BECOME something else – He cannot become old, become wiser, become dead and so forth.¹⁰

Put another way, God *is* Being while everything else merely *has* being. His essence is His existence.¹¹

That's why God said to Moses, "I AM THAT I AM" (Exodus 3:14). In short, He was not saying "I will exist," or "I did exist" or "I might exist," but that "I EXIST" and His existence IS Who He is.¹²

What does this necessarily mean of God's character? In other words, **what does His self-existence unavoidably imply theologically?** Consider:

- **GOD'S SELF-EXISTENCES MEANS THAT HE IS SELF-SUFFICIENT** – God does not rely on anyone or anything. He is self-content within His tri-personal nature. This goes into the issue of why God made us and why He created the universe. Mankind has always asked WHY God created. Well, we can know why God created only as far as God answers our questions through scripture.

From scripture it is clear that God did not create the universe and us because He lacked something or that He was lonely.¹³ No, God created us out of His goodness so that we might be partakers in His love and joy (2 Peter 1:4).

¹⁰ Geisler, Norman. *Systematic Theology*. pg. 30-38

¹¹ To understand this phrase let us understand the words "essence" and "existence." *Essence* is an individual nature which serves to define what a thing is" (Craig & Moreland, 465). *Existence* is the entering into the predication or exemplification relation (Craig & Moreland, 191).

¹² Tozer A.W. *The Attributes of God* Vol. 2. (Camp Hill, PA: Wing Spread Publishers, 2007) pg. 17

¹³ Tozer, A.E. *The Knowledge of The Holy*. (New York, NY: Harper-Collins Publishing, 1978). pg. 33; and Copan. Pg. 32

To think God created because He was lonely, sad, incomplete is to misunderstand the self-existence and self-sufficiency of GOD. If God were to NEED then it would show that He has a deficiency and is thus not wholly perfect, He would not be pure actual or pure Being, but something that had potential and deficiency. **Just think:** when we need water, or we need love, or we need money, it shows our dependency and deficiency physically, emotionally and financially.

God doesn't need. God does not need anyone or anything. He doesn't *need* love, He doesn't *need* worship, He doesn't *need* obedience. Rather God *desires, longs for, and wants* to create, to sustain, to love, to be worshipped and to be obeyed. It is a humbly thought to understand this.

God's creating the universe, His giving us purpose and meaning, His desire for love, worship and obedience is simply an expression of His loving, creative and just being. Even more, when you think about God being self-existent and self-sufficient and then you apply this to Him becoming flesh through Jesus of Nazareth, it truly shows God's greatness and love. That He would condescend Himself to the point of being born in flesh through a woman and having to be reliant on people and to be physically limited in many respects. This is amazing.

- **GOD'S SELF-EXISTENCES MEANS THAT HE IS SELF-ATTESTING** – If God is self-existent then there is no truth outside or beyond Him. If He is the Ground of all Existence, the Sustainer of all Reality, then He necessarily is the criterion of TRUTH. This also means that when He says what He says He means what He says, and He is what He says. He never speaks out of two sides of His mouth and He never gives insufficient answers to what life is all about. It also means that when He says something THEN THAT IS FINALE! He doesn't have to appeal to a higher authority, He doesn't have to cite His sources, He doesn't have to consult with the specialists, because He is the sole ultimate authority, source, and specialist on all matters, bar none (*Isaiah 40:13; Job 12: 13; Romans 11:34*).
- **GOD'S SELF-EXISTENCES MEANS THAT HE IS SELF-ENTITLED** – If God is self-existent then not only is he self-sufficient and self-attesting, but he is self-entitled. By this I mean His right to rule the Universe is not given to Him by anyone! He is the King of the Cosmos, the Definer of all Definitions, the Sustainer of all sustenance, the self-accredited Supreme Judge, He is Decider of all decisions, the Final Fact to all subjective preferences. God isn't elected to rule everything by your democratic tastes, and He doesn't need credentials in order to speak authoritatively and finally on any issue. He has the right to rule because He is the rule. (*Deuteronomy 10:17; Psalm 99; Matthew 28:18*)

APPLICATION

“But of what matter does looking at God’s self-existence matter to me?” one may ask. Well, it matters greatly! Do you remember at the beginning of this study I spoke of Leo Tolstoy? Tolstoy struggled with meaning in his life after reflecting on the brevity of human existence. Remember, he said,

Today or tomorrow sickness and death will come (they had come already) to those I love or to me; nothing will remain but stench and worms. Sooner or later my affairs, whatever they may be, will be forgotten, and I shall not exist.... One can only live while one is intoxicated with life; as soon as one is sober it is impossible not to see that it is all a mere fraud and a stupid fraud!

What could possibly have saved Tolstoy from such a life of dread and suicide? It was his release from all the calculable rationalistic explanations of life and a coming into the fullness of the God who is. He said it this way,

Rational knowledge presented by the learned and wise, denies the meaning of life, but the enormous masses of men, the whole of mankind receive that meaning in irrational knowledge. And that irrational knowledge is faith, that very thing which I could not but reject. It is God, One in Three; the creation in six days; the devils and angels, and all the rest that I cannot accept as long as I retain my reason.

...

I asked: “What is the meaning of my life, beyond time, cause, and space?” And I replied to quite another question: “What is the meaning of my life within time, cause, and space?” With the result that, after long efforts of thought, the answer I reached was: “None.”

...

Having understood this, I understood that it was not possible to seek in rational knowledge for a reply to my question, and that the reply given by rational knowledge is a mere indication that a reply can only be obtained by a different statement of the question and only when the relation of the finite to the infinite is included in the question. And I understood that, however irrational and distorted might be the replies given by faith, they have this advantage, that they introduce into every answer a relation between the finite and the infinite, without which there can be no solution.

...

So that besides rational knowledge, which had seemed to me the only knowledge, I was inevitably brought to acknowledge that all live humanity has another irrational knowledge — faith which makes it possible to live. Faith still remained to me as irrational as it was before, but I could not but admit that it alone gives mankind a reply to the questions of life, and that consequently it makes life possible.¹⁴

¹⁴ Tolstoy’s *A Confession*, excerpts from <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/06/03/tolstoy-confession/>

God being self-existent is meaningful and practical to you in several ways:

(1) **GOD'S ASEITY THEOLOGICALLY UNIQUE** — God's aseity marks a chasm of difference between pantheistic views of God, polytheistic views of God, and deistic views of God. In pantheism God is equal to the Universe. There is no distinction. God and the Universe are in a univocal relationship. One cannot be without the other.

In polytheism the gods are reliant on other gods for their being, and on others for their relatability. In deism God is so other and distant that He doesn't relate to the world, but in Christianity God interacts with the world.

<https://credomag.com/2019/08/counter-cultural-aseity-gods-aseity-in-the-old-testament/>

(2) **GOD'S ASEITY SHAPES ALL OTHER ATTRIBUTES** — Theologians throughout the history of the Church have recognized that the attribute of divine aseity is "the primary attribute of God's being."¹⁵ This means to say that from aseity flows all other perfections of God. If God is without equal, if He is the Greatest Being there can be, then He is by definition the Greatest Good, the Greatest Justice, the Greatest Love, the Unhindered Boundless Eternal One.

(3) **GOD'S ASEITY UNDERMINES OUR SELFISHNESS** — Self-existence equals independent — not being dependent on anyone. Satan and man want to be independent. When we desire to be independent we are opposing our self-hood to His self-existence. Our whole life should be lived as dependent to God — who is the greatest independent Being that is self-existent.

You see, it is so true, that "man is a sinner because and only because he challenges God's selfhood in relation to his own."¹⁶ Mankind tries to displace God as his ultimate source of reliance and strength and to assume for himself that he is self-sufficient and independent. In many respects, mankind's sinfulness is the mass rebellion against the utter dependence he has on God for His creation, defining and sustaining. As A.W. Tozer said,

"The definition of sin is a fallen selfhood.... That's where sin came in — sin reached up and took God's self and said, 'I'll be self myself'.... Isn't that the way the average sinner acts? He's his own little god.... He puts himself in capital letters and forgets that there's anybody up there that'll judge him.... [Sin] is asserting my created and derived self, putting myself on the throne and saying, 'I am self: I am that I am.'"¹⁷

It is true that we are guilty of this. We set ourselves up as self-sustainers, independent people who do not need help or assistance. When in fact we are utterly reliant upon God to even breathe and exist!

(Job 42:1-6)- Job sees the greatness of God. Job comes to humbleness — we depend upon God for our very existence and we are dependent upon Him for our very being. Even those who deny Him and blaspheme Him rely on Him for their very existence.

Tozer said sin is fallen selfhood. Then what is salvation? I'll let Tozer say it in his Tozeresque way,

"What does 'born again' mean? Among other things, it means a renewal, a rebirth, but it also means getting off the throne and putting God on it. It means the self-existent One is recognized for who He is.... It isn't... coming forward and signing a card with a big grin. It's a matter of realizing that you've been occupying a stolen throne—one that belongs to Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father. You've been saying, "I AM THAT I AM," in capital letters, when you should say meekly and reverently, "O God, I am because Thou art."¹⁸

¹⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, pg. 124

¹⁶ Tozer, A.W. *The Knowledge of The Holy*, pg. 29

¹⁷ A.W. Tozer, *The Attributes of God, vol. 2* (Camp Hill, PA: Wing Spread Publishers, 2007), pg. 27-28

¹⁸ A.W. Tozer, *Attributes*, pg. 30-31

(4) GOD'S ASEITY ULTIMATELY SHIFTS OUR CONCERNS & WORSHIP – God is the object of Ultimate Concern. If God is the very ground of all existence, the sustainer of all other sustainers, the self-sufficient, self-contained, infinite One that gives not just being but meaning to all of existence, then what could compare to Him as the most important thing in life?

Think about this for just a moment. God is the ground of everything. God has made everything. God sustains everything. There is nothing beyond His reach nor beyond His power. This means we are nothing but mere stewards of those things that we have and do and make. The money we make and tithe to God, He already owns it! Get it!? He doesn't need your money! He doesn't need your praise! He doesn't need your obedience! He doesn't need anything from anybody because he already possesses all.

God has no needs. God owes us nothing. What did Paul say?

**“Who has given a gift to God that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things.”
Romans 11:35-36 (ESV)**

This changes EVERYTHING as it comes to religion and faith. It means the sacrifices in the Old Testament were not needed by God. God doesn't need to be satiated. God doesn't need sacrifice. Rather sacrifice, service, love, obedience, worship – these are FOR US and FROM US. They are the fulfillment of our intended purpose for which we were made. It is an act of selflessness by which we worship to display towards Him the ultimacy of Who He is. It is to exalt Him because He is worthy.