Anselm's Ontological Argument for the Existence of God

Anselm's argument is an *a priori* argument; that is, it is an argument that is independent of experience and based solely on concepts and logical relations, like a mathematical proof. The form of the argument is that of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Such an argument works like this:

>   Suppose P.
>   If P, then Q.
>   But Q is absurd (i.e. implies a contradiction).
>   Therefore, P is false (or not the case).

Anselm begins with a stipulative definition of "God" as "a being than which no greater being can be conceived."

The argument of *Proslogium* (Ch. II):

>   (1) God exists in the understanding but not in reality. (Supposition)
>   (2) Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone. (Premise)
>   (3) God's existence in reality is conceivable. (Premise)
>   (4) If God did exist in reality, then he would be greater than he is (from (1) and (2)).
>   (5) It is conceivable that there be a being greater than God is (from (3) and (4)).
>   (6) It is conceivable that there be a being greater than the being than which nothing greater can be conceived ((5), by the definition of "God").

But surely

>   (7) It is false that it is conceivable that there be a being greater than the being than which none greater can be conceived.

Since (6) and (7) contradict each other, we may conclude that

>   (8) It is false that God exists in the understanding but not in reality.

Thus, if God exists in the understanding, he also exists in reality. Since even the fool (or rational atheist) will allow that God exists in the understanding, God exists in reality. From the definition of God as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived," it follows by logical necessity that God exists.

What does Anselm mean in (2)? Two interpretations:

>   (2*) If A has every property B has and A exists and B does not, then A is greater than B.
>   (2**) For any worlds W and W' and object x, if x exists in W and x does not exist in W', then the greatness of x in W exceeds the greatness of x in W'.

In other words, it seems to be the case that Anselm takes *existence* to be a property of an object that makes it great. Is this right?

Anselm's second argument (*Proslogium* (Ch. III)) is also tricky. It seems to have the following form:

    (1) Suppose that God – again understood as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived" – does not exist. (Supposition)
    (2) Now, it is possible to conceive of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist. (Premise)
    (3) This being is greater than a being that can be conceived not to exist. (Premise)
    (4) If that, than which nothing greater can be conceived (i.e. God) can be conceived not to exist, then it is not that, than which nothing greater can be conceived (from (3)).
    (5) But this is a contradiction.
    (6) Therefore, God exists and is a being that cannot be conceived not to exist.

What does Anselm mean by (2) and (3)? First, if x cannot be conceived not to exist, then x's existence is said to be *necessary*. To say that x is necessary (or that its existence is necessary) is to say that x exists in every possible world. Second, to say that x can be conceived not to exist is to say that there is a world, W, in which x does not exist. So now we have the following:

    (2*) It is possible to conceive of a being that exists in every possible world.
    (3*) A being that exists in every possible world is greater than a being that does not exist in every possible world.

Another way to put the conclusion is that *God's existence is necessary*.

Note that this argument does not rule out that we will end up with more than one necessary being. But, given Anselm's definition of God, we know that God is greater than any other necessary being.

The traditional criticism of this argument is found in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/87). Kant argues that "existence is not a predicate" and so cannot make something greater than it would be if it did not exist. "Being is obviously not a real predicate, i.e., a concept of something that could add to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing or of certain determinations in themselves. In the logical use it is merely the copula of a judgment."

Mini-bibliography:
I wrote this up a while ago. As I recall, I used the web page of Gideon Rosen (Princeton) on this argument, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, and various works of David Lewis, Robert Adams, and Alvin Plantinga.

Aquinas' Five Ways

In contrast to Anselm's argument(s), the arguments for the existence of God in the *Summa Theologiae* (I, q. ii, a. 3) are *a posteriori*; that is, they are derived from experience.

The first and second ways are similar and depend upon a common premise regarding the impossibility of an infinite causal chain.

First Way:

> (1) Some things are in motion. (Observation of the world)
> (2) Whatever is moved is moved by another. (Principle of physics)
> (3) No (inanimate) thing can bring about its own motion. (From (2).)
> (4) The chain of movers cannot be infinite.
> (5) There must be a first (non-moved) mover. This is God. (From (3) and (4).)

Second Way:

> (1) Each thing in the sensible world is caused by something else. (Observation?)
> (2) A cause precedes its effect. (Definition of causation)
> (3) No thing can be the cause of itself. (From (2).)
> (4) The chain of causes cannot be infinite.
> (5) There must be a first cause, which is self-caused (*causa sui*). This is God. (From (3) and (4).)

Naturally, if one rejects step (4) in these two arguments, one need not conclude that God, or a first mover or a first cause, exists.

The third way ultimately appeals to the Anselmian idea of necessary existence. The argument is nevertheless quite different. It could be sketched like this:

> (1) For all x's, x is either a cause of itself (God) or caused by something else. (Premise. Cf. the Second Way.)
> (2) Suppose the existence of everything in the world is merely possible. (Supposition)
> (3) Some things in nature come to be and pass away. (Observation)
> (4) It is possible for these things to be and not to be. (From (3).)
> (5) Therefore, it is impossible for them to exist at all times. (From (4). That is, if it is possible for x not to exist, then there is a time at which x does not exist.)
> (6) If everything can not exist, then there was a time when nothing was in existence. (From (2) and (5)?! Perhaps Aquinas sneaks in the idea that there cannot be an infinite chain.)
> (7) If there was a time when nothing was in existence, then there would be nothing at all in the world now. (From (1) and (6).)

(8) But this is absurd. (Look around you.)
(9) Therefore, it is not the case that all beings are merely possible; there must be something the existence of which is necessary. This necessary being is God.

The fourth way assumes that God is the source of all perfection(s) in the world. It resembles the first and second ways in that God is taken to be, not the cause of the existence of beings, but the cause of their qualities.

(1) There is a gradation of qualities among beings in the world. (Observation)
(2) The gradation of qualities is a function of the resemblance to the maximum state of any particular quality. (Premise)
(3) The maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus. (Premise)
(4) *All "perfections" – for example, being, goodness, justice, etc. – are different manifestations of the same quality. (Premise)*
(5) There must be something that is the maximum of the genera being, goodness, etc. This is what we call God. (From (3) and *(4)*. Note that something like *(4)*, though not stated, is required for the argument; otherwise, perfection P_1 could result in maximum M_1, perfection P_2 in maximum M_2, and so on; and M_1, M_2, … could nevertheless be independent things. That is, there could be a unique cause of being in the world, a unique cause of goodness, and so on.)

The fifth way (which has come to be known as the "Teleological Argument" or the "Argument from Design") has had a long history and is encountered often in debates between creationists and evolutionary biologists.

(1) Things that lack knowledge always act in the same way and always act to obtain the best result. (Observation)
(2) Whatever acts in a constant way and so as to obtain a particular result acts for an end. (Premise)
(3) Things that lack knowledge act for an end. (From (1) and (2).)
(4) Only intelligence or a knowing mind can direct the action for an end. (Premise)
(5) Since the things that lack knowledge cannot themselves direct their actions for an end, there must be an intelligent being (distinct from nature) that directs their actions. This is what we call God. (From (3) and (4).)

Pascal's Wager

In Pascal's text, we find the claim that reason cannot prove the existence of God but that it is rational to choose to believe in God. There are a number of very important issues that run throughout his argument: voluntarism (the view that one can will to believe, probability theory, pragmatism, the concept of infinity.)

Essentially, Pascal argues that there are two sets of possibilities (a) either God exists or He doesn't and (b) either you believe or you don't. In other words, there is the following matrix.

(I)	God exists	God doesn't exist
I believe	∞	0
I don't believe	-∞	0

That is, we could think of it in the following way:

(II)	God exists	God doesn't exist
I believe	Heaven, infinite happiness	Status quo
I don't believe	Hell, infinite suffering	Status quo

What about for the party animal?

(III)	God exists	God doesn't exist
I believe	Heaven	Wasted life: no fun
I don't believe	Hell (bummer, dude)	Yahoo!

What is Pascal's view?

(IV)	God exists	God doesn't exist
I believe	∞	Virtuous life (nevertheless)
I don't believe	-∞	Vicious life (nevertheless)

But, ultimately, the argument is a little more complex. Consider Case I above:

1. Either God exists or God does not exist, and you can either wager for God or wager against God. The utilities of the relevant possible outcomes are as follows, where f_1, f_2, and f_3 are numbers whose values are not specified beyond the requirement that they be finite:

	God exists	God doesn't exist
I believe	∞	f_1
I don't believe	f_2	f_3

2. Rationality requires the probability that you assign to God existing to be positive, and not infinitesimal.
3. Rationality requires you to perform the act of maximum expected utility (when there is one).
4. <u>Conclusion 1</u>. Rationality requires you to wager for God.
5. <u>Conclusion 2</u>. You should wager for God.

Even more detail: This is a wager; there are probabilities (*p*) involved for each possible way the world might be. We must consider our *expected utility* (E) for either of our bets, thus:

E(wager for God) = $(\infty * p) + (f_1 * (1-p)) = \infty$ (for any $p > 0$)

E(wager against God) = $(f_2 * p) + (f_3 * (1-p)) =$ finite reward

Therefore, by (3), you are required to wager for God.

(The above reproduces the argument as given in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.)

Some Objections:

(1) Maybe there is a zero probability that God exists (hardcore atheism).

(2) Maybe it's immoral to make this kind of wager. It is out of self-interest, after all.

(3) Maybe the choice "OK, I will believe in God" is not sufficient to bring about *genuine* belief.