

Teacher Resource Bank

GCE Religious Studies

Candidate Exemplar Work

Unit 3B: *Philosophy of Religion*

Candidate's Response to
The Ontological Argument



CANDIDATE EXEMPLAR WORK

GENERAL CERTIFICATE OF EDUCATION ADVANCED LEVEL



RELIGIOUS STUDIES UNIT 3B PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

RST3B

EXAMPLE OF CANDIDATE'S RESPONSE

For this paper you must have:

- a 12 page answer book.

Time allowed: 1 hour 30 minutes

Instructions

- Use black ink or black ball-point pen.
- Write the information required on the front of your answer book.
The *Examining Body* for this paper is AQA. The *Paper Reference* is **RST3B**.
- Answer **two** questions.

Information

- The maximum mark for this paper is 100.
- The marks for questions are shown in brackets.
- In each question, part (a) tests your knowledge and understanding, while part (b) tests your skills of reasoning and evaluation.
- You will be marked on your ability to use English, to organise information clearly and to use specialist vocabulary where appropriate.

RST3B: Philosophy of Religion – *The Ontological Argument*

- 1 (a)
- Explain the ontological argument as proposed by Anselm.***

(30 marks) AO1**Candidate Response**

St. Anselm proposed the ontological argument in order to prove the existence of God. The ontological argument uses a priori reasoning, and it is deductive. This means that it starts with a statement that is known to be true solely through definition (God is the greatest conceivable being) and develops the implications of this statement in order to reach a logical conclusion. The deductive reasoning allows Anselm to claim a logical progression to his conclusion, he is simply showing what the definition means. A great deal rests on the idea of the statement.

The ontological argument begins with definition of God as, “the greatest conceivable being” or that than which none greater can be thought. This Anselm holds to be a definition to which we all adhere – even the atheist, who rejects God, accepts that this is a good definition of Him.

Therefore, Anselm states that God exists in the mind, even the mind of those who deny His existence. However he points out that it is greater to exist in reality and in the mind than in the mind alone. Take for example a wallet with £1000 in it. If it exists in the mind it is merely a pleasant thought – but if it exists in reality it can be spent and is greater. Since God is the greatest conceivable being, He must exist in reality and in the mind, because to think otherwise involves a contradiction.

Anselm goes further in saying that God could possibly be a contingent God – that is, dependent on something else for existence. If this were true He would not be a God worthy of worship and would not be the greatest conceivable being. A necessary God, one whose non existence is impossible is greater than a contingent God whose non existence is possible. Therefore we must accept that god is also necessary, as well as existent in reality, because to think otherwise involves a contradiction.

General Comments

A very concise written style produces an answer which is well-organised and closely focused on the question. The answer has many strengths. It makes good use of technical terms and gives a clear outline of the argument. There are, however, a number of places where development is required and there should have been opportunity to write a little more expansively given that, even allowing for thinking time, about 24 minutes can be spent on a part (a) question.

The last two paragraphs both end with the statement ‘to think otherwise involves a contradiction’. This is an important point and needed developing. The weakness of the atheist position is said to be that their thinking is self-contradictory since they both affirm and deny the ‘greatest conceivable being’ in the same statement, ‘God does not exist’.

The final paragraph is a little loose – the term contingent is not one Anselm uses, and he goes further by saying that God exists so truly he cannot even be thought of as not existing. Anselm also explains that those who deny God’s existence can do so only because they only know the word God, not God himself. The candidate could have referred directly to the understanding of the argument found in the work of philosophers like Kant and Norman Malcolm.

Level 6 (26 marks)

(b) **How successful is the argument as proof of God's existence?**
(20 marks) AO2

Candidate Response

The validity of the argument has been questioned by Hume, as he said that "God exists" is a synthetic statement rather than an analytic statement (this means that the existence of the thing in question is not necessarily true: Descartes, another user of the ontological argument, as well as Anselm, hold that it was impossible to have a non-existent God.). Hume continued his critique, saying that in order to prove something's existence, one cannot begin by saying that the thing exists, and then logically conclude that it does.

Gaunilo, a contemporary of Anselm, criticised his argument, saying that one could define an island as being the most perfect island conceivable, with beautiful beaches, lush vegetation and blue lagoons. However this definition does not mean that this island must exist. Anselm replied by saying that his argument only applied to necessary beings; an island, being contingent, cannot be used in this argument.

Kant further criticised the argument – he criticised Anselm's usage of existence as predicate (i.e. as a quality that adds to a thing). He stated that by saying something exists, we do not add anything to it: we are merely describing whether or not it actually does exist. He gave an example to prove this: if we reverse the argument that Anselm uses, we can say that something that does not exist also lacks existence: but how can something that does not exist lack anything at all?

In a very fundamental way the ontological argument is circular –it is based on the premise that it is trying to prove. This means that we cannot take it as a solid proof for the existence of God: as Peter Vardy stated, we could very well define the greatest possible purple dragon called Horace, but this doesn't mean that he exists.

Russell stated that Anselm has used the word "exist" incorrectly. He argued that existence must include some element of shared knowledge of something's existence: for example cows exist because we all know what a cow is; and call quadrupeds that produce milk, moo and are black and white cows. The same situation doesn't exist for God, Russell argues.

I think that the ontological argument is, on the whole, unsuccessful: it is a classic example of circular argument, and has many unanswered critics. Therefore it cannot prove the existence of God.

Commentary

The answer does not start off well – the material in brackets is very condensed and it is not clear why Descartes' point is relevant, nor is it made explicit which aspect of Anselm's argument is being criticised. It is obvious that the candidate is reporting Hume's point of view rather than directly evaluating the argument. The main criticism here seems to be that you cannot assume what you set out to prove, and it is that supposed weakness of the argument that needs supporting or countering.

Gaunilo's view is reported, but again the point of his criticism, that the reasoning of the argument leads to absurd conclusions, is not explicitly stated. Anselm's response is clear although it could have been developed.

Kant's point is clear – there is no attempt to evaluate it, or counter it, but it is clearly stated.

The answer then repeats two points already made – (1) the argument is circular (paragraph 1) and, (2) using Vardy and the purple dragon to make the same point as Gaunilo with his island. It then passes on to Russell. This does add a new element but the point of view is only stated – it is not evaluated, discussed or countered. The idea attributed to Russell that there is no shared experience of God certainly calls for consideration.

The conclusion refers to these critics as 'unanswered' but this is too sweeping.

In summary, the answer is a rehearsal of criticisms that have been made – some very similar to each other – rather than a direct answer to the question. It barely addresses 'proof' and evaluation is limited.

Level 5 (14 marks)

TOTAL 40 out of 50 marks