Looking for ‘proofs’ of God’s existence.
If you ask for a proof of God then this suggests that the existence of God is dubious. This is perhaps why believers do not ask for proof because they do not need it. If you offer to give a proof of God you are admitting that although God might be absent you have some evidence that God exists.

But what about proving the existence of God? Many people have different beliefs about God, how do you prove something that is so many different things to so many different people?

Take the example of a beautiful piece of music, you could point out the rich harmonies, soaring, anthemic melodies, meaningful, poetic words, but if you are talking to a tone-deaf person, all your reasoning may leave them unmoved. In music we need to hear more than just one piece to appreciate music as a valuable concept. To find proof, therefore, of the existence of God we also need to find out more about what God is like.

What God is and What God is not.
The most respected philosophers of the world’s religions have stressed that god is not a being or an object like any other in the universe. God, they say, cannot be imagined in its essential nature by the human mind.

- Christianity – Thomas Aquinas wrote that ‘we do not know what God is’. He referred to God as an ‘unlimited ocean of being.’
- Judaism – Moses Maimonides wrote that we cannot say anything positive about God at all, but only what God is not.

All this would suggest that as God is so far from being a finite picturable being that it might be better to say that God is ‘nothing’ (not-a-thing), than to say God is a thing for which there is not quite enough evidence. This negative or ‘apophatic’, way as it is often called, is very important for orthodox believers in God. It prevents us from thinking of God as a finite object that we can understand with a little effort. God is the ultimate mystery of being, ungraspable by human thought.

‘Nothing Greater can be conceived’ *(Anselm - Proslogion 2)*.
It is obviously not enough to describe God as a big nothing! Most writers would agree that God could be described as;

- Self-existent – God does not depend on anything else for existence. All existence derives from God.
- God is supreme value – everything that is worthwhile, that could be chosen by a fully rational being, exists in God in an unsurpassable way (nothing is better or greater than God).
The Ontological Argument.
Ontological refers to ‘being’ or ‘existence’. The aim of the ontological argument is to argue analytically that God exists necessarily and therefore show that it is illogical that God does not exist. The ontological argument begins with an *a priori* definition of God, which is deductive. Anselm (1033-1109CE) argued that belief in God is logical and that the objections of the atheist to God are illogical.

Analytic *a priori* deductive argument.

- God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.
- It is better for something to exist in reality than in the mind.
- Therefore God must exist in the mind and in reality, because if God only existed in the mind then we could conceive of something greater than God.

In other words.

- When it comes to spending power, the real pound in your pocket will always be greater than the imaginary wad of notes!
- So something is greater if it actually exists.
- If God is the greatest thing imaginable, he must exist. For if he did not, you could imagine something greater – something with all his qualities, but which did actually exist.

Anselm’s argument that there is nothing greater than God which could be conceived does suggest a proof for God’s existence. However for God to be God there must be more to him than he simply ‘exists’. Anselm goes on to argue that God’s existence is necessary. To suggest that God is necessary is to suggest that there is no possibility of God not existing. Anselm suggests that we need to know more than that he simply exists inside and outside our minds. Anselm believes we do know this;

- It can be conceived that something exists that cannot be thought not to exist.
- God must be such a thing if he is that which nothing greater can be conceived.
- This is because something that can be thought not to exist would be inferior to that which cannot.

Anselm felt he demonstrated not only the existence of God, but also that his existence was necessary.

Tasks.

a) Explain how the ontological argument is an *a priori* argument.
b) Using a different argument to the one above explain Anselm’s analytic *a priori* deductive argument.
c) Explain how Anselm suggested that God’s existence was necessary.
d) Using examples explain the ideas that God is self-existent and of supreme value.
e) Make a list of as many different ways as you can think for how people describe God.
Challenges to the Ontological Argument.

1st Challenges Task.
Answer the following recap questions:
   a) What does a priori mean?
   b) What is the ontological argument for God based on?
   c) How did Anselm define God?

Challenges to Anselm from Gaunilo of Marmoutier (c. 993 – 1083).
As we have seen Anselm thought nothing existed greater than God, he thought that it was greater to exist in reality than in thought. He therefore concluded that God exists. Anselm considered that his argument was strong enough to persuade the ‘fools’ described in psalm 14:1, who say there is no God. Anselm’s first critic was another monk called Gaunilo, who wrote On Behalf of the Fool. Gaunilo accused Anselm of making an illegitimate leap from existence in the mind to existence in reality. Gaunilo argued that Anselm’s logic could be applied to any number of absurd scenarios. Gaunilo gave the example of the perfect island. He imagined that there was an island with an abundance of all good things, the greatest island conceivable. Gaunilo said that according to Anselm’s logic this island must exist in reality. Furthermore, Gaunilo said that in order for this perfect island to be perfect it must be unlike any other existing islands, in this case it could not have actual existence but could only exist in the imagination.

Anselm’s response to Gaunilo.
Anselm responded by saying that Gaunilo had misunderstood his argument. Things such as islands, Anselm said, exist contingently: they don’t have to exist for us to imagine them. God is different by definition because he is not a thing, but God. Anselm held that God is not a contingent being: God’s existence is necessary and logical which means he must exist. To say otherwise is a contradiction.

Suppose, however, Gaunilo had spoken of an island, ‘than which no greater island can be conceived’. Would this coherently oppose Anselm’s argument? The answer would have to be ‘no’. Islands have no intrinsic maximum – that is an island can always be bettered, perhaps by adding a lagoon or another palm tree etc. It would seem, then that Gaunilo’s objections do not successfully refute Anselm’s argument.

Task One.
   a) Describe in words and/or pictures what the perfect island paradise would be. Compare this to someone else’s paradise island are they the same? Note down some of the differences.
   b) Describe another object of your choice that would be the perfect example of this type of object.
   c) As you have described the perfect island and object of your choice does this mean they exist? Explain why or why not.
   d) Write a short dialogue between Anselm and Gaunilo making sure you state both points of view and each person’s response. Start with Anselm’s reasoning for the existence of God.
Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804).

Kant’s two-stage objection was aimed at Descartes but his criticisms also challenged Anselm.

- **Existence is not a real predicate.** This phrase summarises Kant’s complex argument that existence is not a quality in the same way that ‘red’ or ‘large’ are. Therefore whenever existence is added as a predicate it actually makes no difference to the subject. Kant’s argument is: if I have 200 existing pounds, and 200 hundred imaginary pounds, the idea ‘pound’ stays exactly the same whether it exists or not.

- **God cannot be an exception to the rule.** Kant concluded that all the ontological argument was doing was providing a definition of God to see whether the world might have such a being who could fulfil the criterion. In other words the *a priori* is really a synthetic hypothesis – it is not analytical at all. As an analytical argument it is circular and merely says something like, ‘God is an existing being, so God exists.’

Kant objects to Descartes claim that denying God’s existence is equivalent to denying that triangles have three sides, which is contradictory. He states that if one dismisses the idea of both the three sides (predicate) and the idea of the triangle itself (subject), one is left with no contradiction. Kant dealt with Descartes’ notion as a predicate. One can define something any way one likes but whether or not anything matches that definition in reality is another question.

**Kant’s criticism of Anselm.**

Kant stated that ‘existence is not a predicate’. This means that saying ‘X’ exists tells one nothing about ‘X’.

Kant states that a predicate must give us information about X; simply stating that ‘X is’ gives us no information. In fact the opposite statement presents us with a paradox: if ‘X exists’ tells us about a property X has, then ‘X does not exist’ denies that it has this property (or affirms that it lacks it). But how can that which does not exist lack anything?

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**Task Two.**

a) Make sure you have the following words and phrases in your glossary with definitions.

- *A priori*
- Predicate
- Paradox
- Eternal
- Transcendent

b) Briefly explain Kant’s criticism of (i) Descartes and (ii) Anselm. You may do this in prose or bullet points. You may add diagrams or pictures if it will help you remember.
My senses lie to me. They inform me that straight sticks in water are bent. There is no conclusive way to prove that all my experiences aren't just dreams or hallucinations.

Rene Descartes is said to be the father of modern philosophy. He was a French mathematician who insisted on thinking for himself, rather than just accepting what he was taught. Descartes believed that he could establish the philosophical and mathematical foundations for all of human knowledge. He wrote many books, the most famous of which were: Philosophical Essays, which included Discourse on Method (1637), Meditations (1641), and the Principles of Philosophy (1644). He wrote most of his philosophy in Protestant Holland, away from fervent Catholic dogma. Descartes’ methods included investigating the internal workings of the mind in relation to the external world. He emphasised the difference between perceiving and thinking.

Scientific Doubt.
In his Discourse on Method, Descartes sought to discover a new kind of accurate scientific knowledge by following simple procedural rules. His methods were objective and logical; he was impressed by what mathematics and sciences such as astronomy could achieve. In Meditations, he asks if there is any kind of knowledge that can be known with certainty. By applying a technique of radically sceptical doubt, he found he could destroy his beliefs in everything.

Descartes even considered that his abstract thoughts might be illusory or wrong. An invisible demon might be hypnotising him into thinking that he was awake and performing accurate mathematical calculations when he wasn’t.

Cogito ergo sum.
Descartes’ doubting of science and mathematical knowledge is referred to as Cartesian doubt. He found this method was cumulative and ruthless; if you doubted one scientific fact then it led to a doubt in another scientific fact - there was no end to the doubt. Descartes suggested that there is no knowledge that can be guaranteed. He could not even be certain that his own body was real. He was, however, certain that his thoughts existed. Descartes’ theory was that doubting is a kind of thinking, so trying to doubt that you are thinking just doesn’t work. With this insight, Descartes discovered the famous ‘Cogito’.
From this breakthrough Descartes went on to prove that humans are dualist beings – spiritual minds inhabiting physical bodies. He theorised that bodies are like machines and eventually they perish, but our minds are immortal. Descartes did not make it clear how mind and body interact. Descartes thought that God would guarantee abstract rational thinking that was as 'clear and distinct' as the original Cogito itself. This means that our clear mathematical thinking about the world is correct, but our sensory experiences of it are subjective and flawed. Descartes uses his scepticism to establish what sorts of certain knowledge there are.

The Cartesian Circle.
There are numerous problems with Descartes' subjective approach. It seems odd to believe that our senses 'lie' to us. It is also odd to have to rely on God as a guarantor of mathematical certainty. Descartes uses that which he wishes to prove as one of his premises. You can't guarantee the clear and distinct rule with a truth telling deity if you have already claimed that you know he exists because you have a clear and distinct idea of him in your mind. Descartes needs God to guarantee his rule and the rule to guarantee that God exists.

Task one.

a) Give an example of how our senses can lie to us.
b) Explain Descartes method of trying to find out what knowledge can be known with certainty.
c) Explain what Cogito ergo sum means and how Descartes came to this conclusion.
d) Considering Descartes theory explain which parts of the following objects we can be certain of and which parts we cannot. Explain why this is.
   A bird; a cake; a piece of music; a sculpture; a person.

Descartes Ontological Argument.

Descartes was interested in what it means to exist as a perfect being. He started with the idea that God must be ultimately perfect in every way in order to be God. He believed that perfection implies existence. God must exist to be completely perfect. He expanded upon this with a premise known as Descartes' triangle. He held that it was just as absurd to think of a perfect being that did not exist, as it was to conceive of a triangle without three angles. It is in the nature of the triangle to have three angles, and in the same way it is the nature of God to exist.

Tasks.

a) Explain Descartes' Triangle in relation to the Ontological argument for the existence of God.
b) In your opinion, is this a very satisfactory explanation? Explain.
Anselm.

- *Proslogion 2.* ‘God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived.’ Even the unbeliever must have a definition of God in order to dismiss it as a concept.
- If this definition is to be accepted, God must exist in reality, as that which exists in reality will always be greater than that which exists purely in intellectu.
- *Proslogion 3.* It is possible to conceive of a being, the existence of which is necessary.
- God must be such a being if He is ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived.’ This is because a being which possesses necessary existence will always be greater than a contingent being.

Descartes.

- ‘God is a supremely perfect being’.
- ‘Existence’ is a perfection.
- To think of God without existence is like thinking of a triangle without its three sides.
- It is therefore illogical to think of the concept of God without the concept of existence.
These are all examples of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments; they begin with a proposition and attempt to prove (through logical reasoning) that it would be absurd to reject the proposition.

How successful are these arguments? – Gaunilo.

- ‘The most perfect island’.
- Whilst Anselm never compares two things of a like kind, Gaunilo is occupied with comparisons of similarities (i.e. islands).
- This criticism of Anselm does not work as it assumes that it is coherent to conceive than which none more perfect can be conceived; it is not coherent.
- Islands have no intrinsic maximum; that is they can always be bettered.

How successful are these arguments? – Kant.

- There is no contradiction in dismissing both a subject and its associated predicate (i.e. God and existence). This successfully challenges Descartes.
- ‘Existence is not a ‘predicate’. If it were, it would be something that a thing either had or lacked (like blue eyes). This creates a paradox, however, in saying that if something does not exist, how could such a lack (or indeed possess) anything?