

“The Ontological Argument”

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St. Anselm’s Ontological Argument is certainly one of the most audacious arguments in the history of Western philosophy; it may even be the most audacious. It is also one of the most perplexing. Some philosophers have scorned it. St. Thomas Aquinas did. Others have thought they had refuted it. Immanuel Kant thought he had done that. Many philosophers have tried to ignore it. But it is difficult for a serious philosopher to ignore the claims of such a daringly elegant bit of reasoning.

Many philosophers have developed their own version of Anselm’s argument. Some of these versions are quite crude, others are very sophisticated. In the 17th Century every self-respecting rationalist philosopher, including Descartes, Malebranche, Leibniz, and Spinoza, promoted some version or other of the argument. In the three subsequent centuries the argument suffered periods of almost complete neglect. But after each period of neglect, the argument has always been re-discovered, re-defended, and re-criticized.

The ontological argument is certainly not neglected today. No other argument for the existence of God – indeed, for the existence of anything! – has received such lavish attention in the last half-century as has the ontological argument. To be sure, the argument’s detractors are more numerous today than its defenders; but the detractors are not obviously more acute, ingenious, or wise than the defenders. And sometimes a vocal detractor turns into a defender, or the other way around.

Bertrand Russell reports this moment of illumination:

I remember the precise moment, one day in 1894, as I was walking along Trinity Lane, when I saw in a flash (or thought I saw) that the ontological argument is valid. I had gone out to buy a tin of tobacco; on my way back, I suddenly threw it up in the air, and exclaimed as I caught it: “Great Scott, the ontological argument is sound.”¹

Although Russell later un-convinced himself of the cogency of the argument, he retained a deep respect for what it attempts to accomplish, if not for what it succeeds in accomplishing. In his *A History of Western Philosophy* he offers this summary of the argument:

We define “God” as the greatest possible object of thought. Now if an object of thought does not exist, another, exactly like it, which does exist, is greater. Therefore the greatest of all objects of thought must exist, since, otherwise, another, still greater, would be possible. Therefore God exists.²

As we shall see in what follows, Russell’s précis is not an entirely accurate reflection of Anselm’s own version of the argument. Yet it does make vivid an essential part of that version. Russell also makes clear one important reason why philosophers keep returning to the argument:

The real question is: Is there anything we can think of which, by the mere fact that we can think of it, is shown to exist outside our thought? Every philosopher would *like* to say yes, because a philosopher’s job is to find out things about the world by thinking rather than observing. If yes is the right answer, there is a bridge from pure thought to things; if not, not.³

Although there are many versions of the Ontological Argument, it is the original version, the one to be found in St. Anselm’s little treatise, *Proslogion* (also sometimes referred to by its latinized title,

Proslogium), that I shall concentrate on here. I have two reasons for paying special attention to Anselm's own version. One reason is simply that it is the original one. Another reason is that it is, in fact, much more interesting than most all the successor versions.

Among the many intriguing peculiarities of the original argument in Anselm is the fact that this argument for God's existence turns up in a work that is, not an impersonal treatise on metaphysics, or theology, but rather in a sort of philosophical prayer, an "allocution," or address, *to God!* It is surely paradoxical to be addressing a being whose existence one is trying to establish. It is especially paradoxical to be offering the proof as part of a *petitionary* prayer to that very being. There is, to be sure, no formal contradiction in saying to someone (or *as if* to someone), "I hereby offer a proof that you exist," or even, "Help me construct a proof that you exist." But such a procedure is extraordinarily odd. Indeed, the sincerity of one's address to God seems to be undermined by the project of offering a proof of God's existence, just as the sincerity of one's truly needing or wanting a proof seems to undermine the genuineness of the prayer. Nor does paradox or perplexity end there. Why should God, if He does exist, even be interested in one's proof that He exists, especially if God is omniscient? The whole enterprise seems riddled with paradox.

Still, odd as it may seem to be telling God about one's proof of His existence, the project does have important antecedents in Western, especially in Christian, thought. For starters, there is the biblical story of the father who asks Jesus to cure his demoniac son. When Jesus tells him, "All things are possible to him who believes," the father responds, according to the story, "I believe, help my unbelief." (*Mark 9:23-24*)

Then there is an important precursor passage early on in Augustine's *Confessions*, which work is also, in its entirety, a prayer addressed to God. "Give me to understand, Lord," Augustine writes,

whether to call on you first or to praise you, and whether to know you first or to call on you. But who calls on you who does not [yet] know you? Not knowing you he could call on another [beome] in your place. Or are you rather called on that you may be known. (1.1.1)

A reader might think it only a rhetorical flourish for Augustine to suggest that the one who prays might actually, by mistake, be calling on another being, instead of God. But it is well to remember that Augustine was a Manichean learner before he was converted to Christianity. So he could well have thought that some of his own prayers while he was a Manichean were, as it later became clear to him, simply misdirected.

Readers of Plato will recognize in Augustine's puzzle a close relative of what has come to be called the Paradox of Inquiry, which is to be found in Plato's dialogue, *Meno*, at 80de. There Plato's interlocutor, Meno, asks how it will be possible to inquire into the nature of virtue. Either one knows already what virtue is, so that the inquiry will be a sham; or one doesn't, in which case one will not know at what to aim the inquiry, nor will one recognize it, should one happen upon it.

The application of Plato's paradox of inquiry to Augustine's project of searching for God is obvious. Augustine is searching for God when he asks for God's help in the search for Him. So, it seems, his directed search shows, by its very directedness, that it is not a genuine search for something he has not yet found. In addition to Plato's worry about how one can direct a search without already knowing the object of the search and his worry about how one could recognize the object of the search, should one stumble on it, Augustine has another problem. It is the problem of knowing how to direct his request for assistance in his search to the right being, when the being whose assistance he is requesting in the search and the being he is searching for are one and the same.

Eventually Augustine comes to conceive of his search as faith in search of understanding – understanding who it is one has, or should have, faith in. Indeed, this Augustinian phrase, ‘faith in search of understanding’ (*fides quaerens intellectum*) is, Anselm says in his Preface to the *Proslogion*, the first title he gave his own work. Appropriately, Anselm ends Chapter 1 of the *Proslogion* this way:

For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe – that unless I believed, I should not understand.

This idea, too – as I have already indicated – is clearly Augustinian. Even the wording is taken from Augustine, who uses it in a number of passages. For example, in *Sermon 43* Augustine admonishes his hearers:

You said, “I would understand that I may believe.” I said, “Believe that you may understand.”

Proslogion 2

In the first sentence of Chapter 2 of the *Proslogion*, where Anselm presents the core of his great argument, he writes:

And so, O Lord, you who give understanding to faith, give [it] to me so that, as much as you know to be useful, I may understand that you exist, just as we believe you do, and you are this [being] that we believe [you to be].

Thus Anselm asks God to give him understanding, specifically, as it turns out, understanding through a rational proof (a) that God exists and (b) that God has the nature Anselm supposes God to have. The proof for (a) is given in Chapter 2; but the proof of (b) occupies Anselm for the rest of his little treatise.

In the second sentence of Chapter 2 Anselm offers a formal characterization of the being he takes himself to be addressing and whose existence and nature he wants to be able to prove. His formal characterization, though brief, is brilliant. It is also somewhat enigmatic. It is this: “You are something than which nothing greater can be conceived.” Although this characterization is stated in the second person (“you are . . .”), it functions in the argument as something like a definition of the term, ‘God.’ Since we will be referring to it often in what follows, let’s state it formally and understand it to function in much the way definitions of terms function:

(D) God is something than which nothing greater can be conceived.

One might think Anselm has sneaked in his conclusion in this, as I shall call it, “quasi-definition.” After all, (D) tells us that God *is something*. And that, by itself, could be taken to mean that God exists. Thus we could eliminate almost all of Chapter 2 and see Anselm as presenting this simple argument:

Argument S1

(1) God is something than which nothing greater can be conceived.

Therefore,

(2) God is something.

Therefore,

(3) God exists.

Argument S1 is not only simple, it is also simple-minded. Since what Anselm actually presents in *Proslogion 2* is neither simple nor simple-minded, we should protect him against the accusation that his argument is, even in its barest bones, simply Argument S1. The best way to do that is to read (D) in such a way that it comes to no more than this:

(D*) To be God is, or would be, to be something than which nothing greater can be conceived.

Since (D*) is somewhat cumbersome, and (D) is closer to what Anselm actually says in *Proslogion 2*, I shall continue to appeal to (D). But in the further use I make of (D) I shall ask that it be read in such a way that it is equivalent to (D*).

There is another way in which Anselm might be charged, falsely, with begging the question. In modern standard quantificational logic there is a rule called “Existential Generalization.” This rule allows us to infer from ‘a is F’ (i.e., ‘Fa’) that something is F (i.e., $(\exists x) Fx$). If we add identity to first-order quantification theory, we can infer ‘Aristotle exists’ from, say, ‘Aristotle is a philosopher.’ Thus from ‘Aristotle is a philosopher’ (Pa) we may infer ‘Someone is a philosopher and he is Aristotle’ (i.e., $(\exists x)Px.x=a$), which may be simplified to ‘Someone exists who is Aristotle’ (i.e., $(\exists x)(x=a)$).

Having seen how the rule of Existential Generalization works we may think that any statement about God – whether it is a complex statement, such as ‘God is something than which nothing greater can be conceived’ or something quite simple, such as, ‘God is wise’ – is enough to warrant the conclusion that God exists. Thus we could have this argument, which is almost as simple-minded as Argument S1:

Argument S2

(1) God is a perfect being.

Therefore,

(2) Something is a perfect being and it is God.

Therefore,

(3) Something is God, i.e., God exists.

There is, moreover, nothing special about beginning with the premise that God is a perfect being. We could as well begin with any other claim about God, for example, that He is wise, thus:

Argument S3

(1) God is wise.

Therefore,

(2) Something is wise and it is God.

Therefore,

(3) Something is God, i.e., God exists.

As we shall see, Anselm seems to have thought about such simple-minded arguments; he certainly has a way of making sure we don't confuse them with *his* argument. Thus he distinguishes between existence *in the understanding (in intellectu)* and existence *in reality (in re)*. With this distinction in hand, he can agree that using a proper name, such as 'God,' in a statement, almost any statement, sets us up for existential generalization. But just because we understand and accept the claim that Homer wrote the Odyssey, or that Hamlet is a prince, or that God is, say, wise, it does not follow that Homer or Hamlet or God exists *in reality*. All that follows is that Homer and Hamlet and God exist in the understanding. We will need something more to prove that they exist in reality.

So (D) doesn't immediately concede what is to be proved simply because something is being said of God and it follows from the fact that God is such-and-such, say, wise, or a perfect being, or whatever, that God exists. Rather, we are going to have to pay attention to the particular "such-and-such" that (D) gives us -- that is, to what it is, or would be, to be something than which nothing greater can be conceived, to be justified in concluding that God exists in reality.

Where did Anselm get the idea that a proper noun might succeed in doing its job by picking out something in the understanding that is not anything in reality? That is, where did he get the idea that proper names can function by picking out merely imaginary, or mental, entities, rather than robust dwellers in reality? He doesn't say. But it seems likely, when you stop to think about it, that he was drawing on a response to an ancient puzzle in philosophy. That puzzle concerns a difficulty about how we can ever succeed in making a statement that is both meaningful and true when we say something of the form, ' \times^{\uparrow} doesn't exist' (where, it is understood, ' \times^{\uparrow} ' will be replaced either by a proper name, like 'God' or 'Hamlet,' or by a definite description, such as 'the teacher of Aristotle.' To be meaningful, it seems, the proper name or definite description that replaces ' \times^{\uparrow} ' must succeed in picking out something. But if 'the Loch Ness Monster' or 'Shangrila' succeeds in picking out something, then what it succeeds in picking out exists and the statement, 'The Loch Ness Monster doesn't exist,' or the statement, 'Shangrila doesn't exist,' will be false. If, on the other hand, the proper name (say, 'Hamlet') or definite description (say, 'the teacher of Aristotle') does not pick out any definite person or thing, then our hope of denying existence to the teacher of Aristotle, or to Hamlet, would be dashed by the fact that the putative statement we make would not be a real statement at all. Saying "Hamlet doesn't exist" or "The teacher of Aristotle doesn't exist" would be like saying "Blah doesn't exist."

We can call this puzzle about statements of the form ' \times^{\uparrow} doesn't exist' "the Problem of Negative

Existentials.’ It is a puzzle about how intended denials of the existence of putative individuals can ever be both (i) meaningful and also (ii) true. The puzzle has been around since the time of the pre-Socratic philosopher, Parmenides.

Parmenides thought that we couldn’t get away with saying *of anything* that *it* doesn’t exist.⁴ One way to meet Parmenides’s challenge is to distinguish, in the fashion of Anselm, between existence in the understanding, that is, existence in the mind, and existence in reality. We then happily concede that, to succeed in denying the existence of some particular individual or thing, we do need to have that individual person or thing in mind. Thus we concede that that person or thing at least exists in the understanding. But what we are doing, on this proposal, when we deny existence to something or someone we have in mind is to claim that that person or thing exists *only in the* understanding. Our claim is that something or someone we have in mind does not exist *in* reality.

After Anselm gives us (and God!) his quasi-definition, that is, (D), his next move is to recruit a stand-up atheist. He gets his stand-up atheist, whom he calls “the Fool,” to deny God’s existence. Quoting a verse from the biblical book of *Psalms*, a verse he expects will be familiar to his readers,⁵ Anselm writes: “The Fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.””

One might object to labeling an atheist “a fool,” especially in an argument from reason alone aimed at proving God’s existence. Doesn’t labeling the atheist “the Fool” prejudice the outcome of the reasoning?

Perhaps. And perhaps Anselm does mean to express his disapproval of atheism by labeling the atheist “the Fool.” On the other hand, it is essential to the argument he is about to present that either Anselm or someone else deny God’s existence. This is essential because the argument he presents is, in form, a *reductio ad absurdum*, that is, an indirect proof or reduction to absurdity. A *reductio* such as this argument works by denying what one wants to prove and then showing that this denial, no doubt with the addition of assumptions thought to be non-problematic and non-question-begging, leads to absurdity. Since a philosopher’s favorite kind of absurdity is self-contradiction, the philosopher will try to show that the denial of what is to be proved will lead to self-contradiction. And this is precisely what Anselm tries to do.

Of course, Anselm needn’t have recruited some *person*, real or imagined, to deny God’s existence. He could have just said, on his own behalf, “Suppose: God doesn’t exist.” But enlisting the aid of the Fool makes the *reductio* more dramatic. Moreover, since the whole *Proslogion* is in the literary form of a prayer addressed to God, having his resident atheist make the statement Anselm wants to show leads to contradiction saves Anselm the discomfort of having to say, in his prayer, “Suppose you don’t exist.” Indeed, something more than discomfort is at stake here. There seems to be, if not a formal contradiction, what philosophers have sometimes called a “pragmatic contradiction,” in saying, “Suppose you don’t exist.” Anselm avoids this worry by getting his fool to say, “God doesn’t exist.”

The next step in Anselm’s argument is to get the Fool to admit the distinction between merely (i) existing in the understanding and (ii) existing in reality as well. Having secured that admission from his fool, Anselm goes on to get him to agree that God exists at least in the understanding. “But certainly even this very Fool,” he writes, “when he hears this very thing that I say (“something than which nothing greater can be conceived”) understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding, even if he should not understand the thing to exist,” – that is, even if he did not understand it to exist *in reality*.

This is the central move in Anselm’s ontological argument. It is this move that most clearly

distinguishes Anselm's form of ontological argument for God's existence from many other forms of the argument. By insisting that the atheist must agree that God is in the understanding anyway, Anselm opens the way to prove that the atheist is assigning contradictory features to this entity that both he and the atheist have in mind. Thus, whereas Anselm himself supposes this entity in the understanding, something than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in reality as well, the atheist supposes that this something than which nothing greater can be conceived is only a mental or imaginary entity.

We can think of Anselm's making the atheist admit that God exists in the mind anyway as establishing a "referential peg" on which to hang his definition-like characterization of God, 'something than which nothing greater can be conceived.'⁶ Anselm is then in position to ask whether this something in the understanding could be both

(a) something than which nothing greater can be conceived

and also

(b) something that fails to exist in reality.

His argument will try to show that assigning both (a) and (b) to this something in the understanding is absurd, and even absurd in the philosopher's favorite sense of being self-contradictory.

Should the Fool ever have allowed Anselm to have his referential peg? Without that peg Anselm would not be in position to argue that atheism assigns incompatible features to something in the understanding. Perhaps the Fool should not have been so accommodating. What could Anselm have said to a fool who had dug in his heels and refused to admit that this something than which nothing greater can be conceived exists even in the understanding?⁷

Presumably Anselm's response would have been something along these lines:

Oh Fool, if you either claim not to understand the words, 'something than which nothing greater can be conceived,' or else deny that, having understood these words, you still do not have something than which nothing greater can be conceived in your mind, you will not be able to deny God's existence.

Warming to his topic, he could have gone on in this way:

For your atheism to amount to anything, your denial of existence must be directed at God, rather than at the Abominable Snowman, or at Santa Claus, or at an old man in the sky. So, when you say, "God doesn't exist," you mustn't mean "There is no man with a long white beard in the sky," or anything of that sort. You must, in fact, have in mind *something than which nothing greater can be conceived* and deny the existence of that.

We shall return in a moment to the question of whether the Fool should have allowed Anselm to have his referential peg so that he could interpret the Fool's atheism in the way he does. But, for now, we can say that Anselm does have a good case for saying that Fool's atheism consists in saying of something, *x*, that *x* is both (a) and (b).

Anselm's final move in *Proslogion* 2 is to argue that saying of anything that it satisfies both (a) and (b) is self-contradictory. The reason is this:

(G) It is greater to exist in reality as well than to exist merely in the understanding.

We can call (G) “the great-making assumption.” Although, as we shall certainly have to admit, (G) is highly controversial, it has a certain immediate plausibility. Persons and things that exist in reality thereby have actuality, something that merely imaginary entities lack. This actuality, it seems quite plausible to say, makes them greater than their merely imagined counterparts. After all, things that exist *only* in the understanding are obviously dependent beings in the relatively straightforward sense that they wouldn’t have existed at all if someone hadn’t thought of them. By contrast, things that exist in reality are not in this way mind-dependent for their existence. And such mind-independence, it seems plausible to say, is a great-making property.

To see that we are now ready to conclude that God exists in reality, let’s rehearse the steps that Anselm has taken so far in *Proslogion 2*. We find at the beginning of the chapter a **definition**-style characterization of the being whose existence is to be proved, namely, God. (*You are something than which nothing greater can be conceived.*) Next, we try **assuming the opposite** of what is to be proved, with the aim of showing that it leads to absurdity – ideally, self-contradiction. Anselm’s way of assuming the opposite is to quote “the Fool” from the Book of Psalms: *There is no God*. He then reasons that even the “Fool,” that is, the atheist, must have God in mind when he denies God’s existence. Thus the denial of God’s existence is to be understood as the claim that something in the mind, namely, God (that is, *something than which nothing greater can be conceived*) *fails to exist in reality*. But now we are to see that what the Fool is claiming is self-contradictory. It is self-contradictory because it is the claim of something in the understanding that it is both

(a) something than which nothing greater can be conceived

and also

(b) something that fails to exist in reality.

But anything in the understanding that satisfies (b) will be something than which a greater can be conceived, namely, something that exists in reality. And so the atheist’s claim becomes, it seems, a claim about something in the understanding that it is both something than which nothing greater can be conceived and also something than which *a greater can be* conceived, which would clearly be absurd. So God exists in reality, as well as in the understanding.

Objections to the Argument in *Proslogion 2*

1. A fairly obvious way to reject the argument in *Proslogion 2* would be to deny the great-making assumption, (G). Why can’t a supremely great being be simply a figment of one’s imagination? Less grandly, why does, or would, existing in reality make something greater than it would be if it existed only in the understanding?

Norman Malcolm, who shocked many in the American philosophical community back in 1960 by defending a reconstruction of the argument he thought he found in *Proslogion 3*, criticized the argument in *Proslogion 2* for relying on (G), which he considered a mistaken principle. Malcolm wrote:

The doctrine that existence is a perfection is remarkably queer. It makes sense and is true to say that my future house will be a better one if it is insulated than if it is not insulated; but what could it mean to say that it will be a better house if it exists than if it does not?⁸

Malcolm took himself to be restating a criticism of Anselm’s argument to be found in Kant, whom he quoted thus:

By whatever and by however many predicates we may think a thing – even if we completely determine it – we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing *is*. Otherwise, it would not be exactly the same thing that exists, but something more than we had thought in the concept; and we could not, therefore, say that the exist object of my concept exists.⁹

In defense of Anselm, one could say that his argument does not ask us to consider whether *the concept of God as existing* is greater than simply *the concept of God*. What he asks us to consider is whether something in the mind or understanding *that also exists in reality* is greater than something in the mind *that fails to exist in reality*, that is, whether a real F is greater than a merely imaginary F. We might value the house Malcolm has in mind, even if we know it exists only in the mind; but we would pay more money for it if it existed, not only in Malcolm's mind, but also in reality.

2. A more basic criticism of the argument in *Proslogion 2* is also to be found in Kant. “‘Being’ is obviously not a real predicate,” Kant writes; “that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing.”¹⁰ This objection is referred to on the literature as the claim that *existence is not a predicate*.

Again, the criticism does not exactly fit Anselm's statement of his argument. He does not speak of adding the *concept of existence*, or even the *concept of existence in reality*, to the concept of God, or the concept of something than which nothing greater can be conceived. What he does instead is to ask us to compare something existing merely in the understanding with something existing in reality as well. And the latter, he says, is greater.

We might want to know, however, exactly what the terms of comparison are meant to be. Which of these versions of (G) is Anselm assuming:

(G1) Anything that exists both in reality and in the understanding is greater than anything that exists in the understanding alone.

According to (G1) an existent gnat is greater than a merely imagined giant.

(G2) Anything that exists both in reality and in the understanding is greater than the otherwise same kind of thing that exists in the understanding alone.

According to (G2), an scrawny and diminutive, but existent, horse, would be greater than the largest, most graceful, and most beautiful, but merely imagined, horse.

(G3) Anything that exists both in the understanding and in reality is greater than the otherwise exact same thing, if that thing exists merely in the understanding.

What (G3) invites one to compare is, for example, some admirable character in what we take to be a novel, and the person we suppose to exist when we are told that the book we had taken to be a novel is, in fact, a biography of a real woman or man.

The text suggests that it is (G3) that Anselm is appealing to. “For if [it] is even in the understanding alone,” he writes, “[it] can be conceived to exist in reality as well, which is greater.” But, since Anselm doesn't actually state the principle he appeals to, we are left to try to do it on his behalf.

3. The most famous objection to Anselm's argument in *Proslogion 2* is usually called “the Perfect Island” objection. It is inspired by a passage the monk, Gaunilo, a contemporary of Anselm's, wrote, as he put it, “On Behalf of the Fool.” What Gaunilo actually wrote concerns an island allegedly

more excellent than all others, rather than a perfect one:

Now if someone should tell me that there is such an island, I should easily understand what was said, in which there is no difficulty. But suppose that he went on to say, as if by logical inference: “Moreover, you cannot doubt that this island more excellent than all [other] lands, which you do not dispute is in your understanding, exists somewhere in reality. And, since it is more excellent not to be in the understanding alone, but to exist both in the understanding and in reality, for this reason it must exist [in reality].”¹¹

Gaunilo’s lost island (or “Perfect Island,” as it is generally referred to in the literature) is clearly meant to be a parody of Anselm’s argument in *Proslogion 2*. With his parody of Anselm’s argument Gaunilo presents Anselm with a challenge. Although the parody does not, by itself, make clear exactly what is wrong with Anselm’s reasoning, the parody is meant to be so obviously unsatisfactory as an argument for its own conclusion that Anselm is challenged to either (a) explain why the objection one has to the parody does not apply to the ontological argument, or else (b) agree that the ontological argument is also unsatisfactory. Thus Gaunilo’s parody produces the conclusion, by reasoning alone, that some lost island exists. But surely we ought not to be able to establish facts about lost islands by merely *a priori* reasoning, without any empirical investigation at all. Yet if there is something wrong with the lost-island argument, there must equally, it seems, be something wrong with Anselm’s argument.

In fact, the reasoning in Gaunilo’s parody does not track exactly Anselm’s reasoning in *Proslogion 2*. To bring it closer into line with Anselm’s argument we should have to characterize the lost island as something than which nothing greater can be conceived. But no mere island could plausibly be thought to be something than which absolutely nothing greater, or more excellent, can be conceived. More appropriately, it might be thought to be an island than which *no greater island* could be conceived. Perhaps Gaunilo should have characterized his lost island that way.

If Gaunilo did characterize his lost island as an island than which no greater island can be conceived, we could reply that islands, like natural numbers, are inherently limited entities. For any specified island, it could be argued, one might conceive one that is bigger and better – perhaps one that has even more palm trees, or bigger beaches, or whatever.¹² Anselm’s characterization of God, by contrast, does not claim that God is merely an F such that no greater F can be conceived. Anselm’s characterization of God is unqualifiedly superlative. God, Anselm supposes, is something than which *nothing greater* (period!) can be conceived. Thus one might agree that there can be no such thing as an *island* than which no greater island can be conceived any more than there could be such a thing as a *natural number* than which no greater natural number can be conceived. But that fact, by itself, does not establish that there can be no such thing as *something* than which nothing greater can be conceived. And so Gaunilo’s parody is just that, a parody. It does not undermine the credibility of Anselm’s argument.

4. Another popular attempt at a counterexample to Anselm’s reasoning is an argument for the existence of the devil. Can’t we prove the existence of the devil, a being than which nothing more *evil* can be conceived, by similar reasoning? If so, again, there must be something wrong with Anselm’s reasoning.

One complication this time concerns the idea, perhaps quite plausible to us, that existing in reality ought to make an evil being even more evil, just as existing in reality makes a good, or great, being even better or greater than it would be if it were purely mental. Anselm, however, stands in the Platonic tradition, according to which the scale of being is also a scale of goodness, or greatness. That means that nonexistence would be evil. Implausible as it may seem to us, a devil that exists in the understanding, but not in reality, would actually be less good, and so more evil, than one that exists in reality.

5. Perhaps the most interesting objection that can be made to Anselm's argument in *Proslogion 2* is what we might call a "meta-objection." It concerns the way Anselm interprets the Fool's claim, 'There is no God.' As we have seen, Anselm understands this claim, and, by implication, all claims of the form 'X doesn't exist,' to be claims about something in the understanding. More specifically, according to the Anselmian, each such claim is a claim about something in the understanding that it fails to exist in reality. But, as we know from 20th Century philosophy, there are other ways to understand negative existentials besides this.

Bertrand Russell suggested that when we say, "Socrates doesn't exist," we can be taken to have a definite description in mind to replace 'Socrates' -- maybe 'the teacher of Plato.' So perhaps 'Socrates doesn't exist' means 'The teacher of Plato doesn't exist,' and what that means is, perhaps, 'Nobody fits the description, 'the teacher of Plato.'"

If we don't accept the idea of translating

(1) Socrates doesn't exist

into a sentence that mentions the English phrase, 'the teacher of Plato' (after all, (1) doesn't mention any English phrase), we could follow Russell's "theory of descriptions" and translate (1) into this:

(2) It is false that that there is at least and at most one person who taught Plato.

Similarly, we could begin with the Fool's

(3) God doesn't exist

and use Anselm's quasi-definition to get this:

(4) Nothing fits the description, 'something than which nothing greater can be conceived.'

If, now, we wanted to get rid of the English phrase in (4), we might come up with this:

(5) For any given thing, in the understanding or in reality, a greater than it can be conceived.

Someone might ask how the fool could possibly know (5) to be true. But here it is well to keep in mind that the form of Anselm's argument is a *reductio*. Since the Fool is simply stating, in a dramatic way, the supposition Anselm wishes to show absurd, Anselm doesn't need to know that (5) is true, or even produce any evidence for thinking it is true. The Fool's role is simply to state that God does not exist so that Anselm can show that the Fool's statement leads to self-contradiction. If the Fool insists on having his statement of atheism understood as (5), he can avoid, it seems, Anselm's claim that the Fool has contradicted himself.

Interestingly, this Russell-type response to Anselm's argument *seems* to be anticipated in a comment St. Thomas Aquinas makes in his *Summa contra gentiles*. This comment has gone largely unnoticed in the literature.¹³ Instead, commentators have focused on objections to Anselm's argument that Aquinas makes in his other *summa*, the *Summa theologiae*. In that work Thomas says that God's existence, though self-evident in itself, is not self-evident to us, since we do not know God's essence.¹⁴ But Anselm can easily accommodate that objection, since he, too, thinks we do not know God's essence. As he argues in *Proslogion 15*, God is a something *greater than can be conceived*, that is, presumably, a being greater than can be comprehended, or fully understood. Thus we can know, Anselm thinks, that

God is something than which nothing greater can be conceived without knowing fully what such a being is -- that is, in Aquinas's way of putting the point, without knowing God's essence.

In his *Summa contra gentiles*, however, Aquinas makes this, more telling, objection:

No difficulty befalls anyone who posits that God does not exist. For that, for any given thing, either in reality or in the understanding, something greater can be conceived, is a difficulty only to him who concedes that there is in reality something than which a greater cannot be conceived. (*Summa contra gentiles* 1.11)

In this passage Aquinas seems to be using Anselm's characterization of God to express the atheist's denial of God's existence. If to be God is, or would be, to be something than which nothing greater can be conceived, then for God to fail to exist is for (5) to be true. And, even if Anselm is right and the Fool who claims of something in the understanding that it is both something than which nothing greater can be conceived and something that fails to exist in reality contradicts himself, still, a more clever fool, one who insists on using (5) to express his atheism, would not contradict himself.

In my view, this "Thomistic/Russellian" response to Anselm's argument is a very serious objection to that argument. To say that it is a serious objection is not, however, to say that the Anselmian has no resources to respond to it. Perhaps the most effective response would be to argue for the reality of the intentional object, God-in-the-understanding. So far I have suggested arguing for the existence of this object as a way of allowing that a denial of God's existence might be meaningful, and even true. As we have seen from Aquinas and Russell, however, there is perhaps a better way to do that. A clever fool can succeed in denying the existence of something than which nothing greater can be conceived without appeal to an intermediate, mental or intentional object, in the understanding.

One could, however, take a different tack. One could argue that the history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam provides evidence for supposing that there is a common object of worship in these traditions, a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. If we can provide evidence that there is indeed evidence of such a common object of worship, across various languages, and within different cultures, then we have good reason to say that God, not just as a formula or an idea, but as an object of worship, exists at least in the understanding. Having secured this referential peg, we could then follow Anselm's argument as before and prove, it seems, that God does not exist merely in the understanding, but in reality as well.

Proslogion 3

There is, of course, much more to Anselm's *Proslogion* than Chapter 2. In Chapter 3 Anselm argues that something than which nothing greater can be conceived not only exists in reality, it cannot be conceived *not to exist*. The proof of this conclusion, like the proof in later chapters that God is omnipotent, compassionate, supremely just, and so on, follows the pattern of proof established in *Proslogion 2*: Since x would be greater than y if x, but not y, could not be conceived *not to exist*, something than which nothing greater can be conceived is guaranteed to be such that it cannot be conceived not to exist.

The meaning of this surprising claim is not immediately obvious. Norman Malcolm, in the article of his referred to above, suggests that Anselm means by 'God cannot be conceived not to exist' that God *necessarily exists*. He writes:

What Anselm has proved is that the notion of contingent existence or of contingent nonexistence cannot have any application to God. His existence must either be logically necessary or logically impossible. The

only intelligible way of rejecting Anselm's claim that God's existence is necessary is to maintain that the concept of God, as a being a greater than which cannot be conceived, is self-contradictory or nonsensical. Supposing that this is false, Anselm is right to deduce God's necessary existence from his characterization of Him as a being a greater than which cannot be conceived.¹⁵

Leibniz had made a somewhat similar claim. He chided Descartes for not bothering to establish that the existence of God is possible. He himself provided such a proof, with the assurance that if God's existence is possible, then it is necessary.¹⁶

It isn't, however, clear that Anselm understands 'cannot be conceived not to exist' to mean 'necessarily exists,' let alone 'exists by logical necessity.' As I have already mentioned, Anselm argues in *Proslogion* 15 that God, i.e., something than which nothing greater can be conceived, is a greater than can be conceived. By this claim he presumably means that God exceeds our powers of comprehension. In any case, he quite clearly does not mean that God is being greater than is logically possible (and so, presumably, a logically impossible being).¹⁷ Nevertheless, *Proslogion* 3 has inspired a tradition of developing ontological-style arguments, not just to prove that God exists, or exists in reality, but to prove that God has necessary existence.

Whether or not *Proslogion* 3 constitutes an independent argument for God's existence, it actually poses a threat to the cogency of Chapter 2. After all, as I have emphasized above, *Proslogion* 2 has the form of a *reductio*. In that reduction the Fool is made to state what is to be shown, by reduction, to lead to self-contradiction. But *Proslogion* 3 seems to conclude that, when the Fool says, "There is no God," he cannot even make sense of what he is saying. He cannot understand what he is saying precisely because, if the reasoning of *Proslogion* 3 is correct, God cannot be conceived not to exist.

Anselm addresses this new threat in Chapter 4, where he asks, appropriately, "How has the Fool said in his heart what he could not conceive?" Anselm replies that there are two ways of conceiving something in the heart, that is, two ways of having something in mind. In one way, he says, a thing is conceived when the word signifying it is thought, in another, when the object itself is understood. His idea seems to be that the Fool can conceive God according to the word and so state his atheism well enough for the *reductio* to work, even though his atheism rules out his being able to conceive God himself as not existing.

Does this move rescue the *reductio* of *Proslogion* 2? Or does it, perhaps, further cast the intelligibility of the reasoning there in doubt. After all, *Proslogion* 4 seems to allow the possibility that

A1. 'God' doesn't name anything

is a perfectly good way for the Fool to conceive God "according to the word" and thus to succeed in denying God's existence. But if the Fool insists on having his atheistic claim interpreted as (A1), it's hard to see how Anselm's style of argumentation can show atheism self-contradictory.

Again, Anselm does seem to have a plausible reply open to him. It is a pretty uninteresting atheism, he can say, that consists in making a claim about the English word, 'God,' or the Latin word, 'deus,' namely the claim that those particular words are empty. "You are something than which nothing greater can be conceived," Anselm says to God (or, as he supposes, to God), and then adds, "Or is there no such nature?" (*An ergo non est aliqua talis natura [?]*) For him the question of atheism should be the question of whether there exists, in reality, something than which nothing greater can be conceived. Can the Fool be coherently supposed to say these words, either without any signification or with some extraneous signification" (*aut sine ulla aut com aliqua extranea significatione*) and manage, by these

shabby means, get God in his understanding?

Before we judge Anselm uncharitably on this question, it would be well to remember that, for a whole range of *a priori* truths, to attempt to prove them by reductio may land us in a similar puzzle. In a discussion of reductio arguments in mathematics, Alice Ambrose and Morris Lazerowitz have this to say:

Still, there seems no escaping the question whether we are really making a *supposition* when we say “Suppose Goldbach’s proposition is true [that is, suppose there is an even number greater than 3 that is not the sum of two prime numbers]”, and whether we are really assuming anything when we start the proof of the irrationality of $\sqrt{2}$ by saying “Suppose there is a rational number $= \sqrt{2}$ ”. In the latter case the end result of the demonstration implies that we could not have conceived what we stated we were supposing. Are we merely going through the verbal motions of making an assumption or asking a question, without actually doing so? One can utter the words “I am in two different places simultaneously”, but are we using the words to express something we are entertaining?”¹⁸

Ambrose and Lazerowitz suggest in their article that ‘suppose’ as it is used to introduce a statement in mathematics that is being reduced to absurdity has only an extended sense, since we can’t really suppose the impossible. Similarly, Anselm suggests that ‘conceive’ in our supposition that the Fool conceives God as not existing in reality must also be understood in an extended sense. The Fool can, so to speak, mumble inwardly the words, ‘Something than which nothing can be conceived.’ Even supposing that those words truly pick out God, when the Fool goes on to suppose that this something than which nothing greater can be conceived fails to exist in reality, he has failed to conceive God properly.

You might think that my efforts to defend Anselm have back-fired. If I have succeeded in making plausible and appropriate Anselm’s suggestion that the Fool mumbles the magic words and fails to appreciate their true signification, haven’t I removed the peg *in intellectu* on which Anselm needs to hang the Fool’s contradiction?

I don’t think so. Whatever the Fool comes up with to associate with the words he mumbles in his heart (“something than which nothing greater can be conceived”), when he adds that **it** – that thing he has in mind, whatever it is – is both (a) something than which nothing greater can be conceived and (b) something that fails to exist in reality, the Fool has, Anselm can insist, contradicted himself. And that is the genius of Anselm’s ontological argument, as he presents it in *Proslogion 2*.

Modal Arguments

I have already mentioned that Norman Malcolm claimed to find in *Proslogion 3* a distinct ontological argument – one that would establish, not the mere existence of God, but God’s necessary existence. Let’s call any ontological argument meant to establish the *necessary* existence of God a “modal ontological argument.” I have also suggested one reason for being skeptical about whether the argument Malcolm claims to find in Anselm is actually there. It is that ‘cannot be conceived not to exist’ in *Proslogion 3* does not mean ‘necessarily exists,’ let alone ‘exists by logical necessity.’

There are, however, other passages in Anselm one might look to for an authentically modal argument. Robert Adams offers a very interesting reconstruction of an Anselmian text as a modal ontological argument.¹⁹ But Adams looks for this proof, not to *Proslogion 3*, but rather to this rather turgid passage from the first chapter of Anselm’s reply to Gaunilo:

For no one who denies or doubts that there exists something than which a greater cannot be conceived denies or doubts that if it did exist, its nonexistence, either in reality or in the understanding, would be impossible. For otherwise it would not be that than which a greater cannot be conceived. But as to whatever

can be conceived and does not exist – if it did exist, its nonexistence, either in reality or in the understanding, would be possible. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought can even be conceived, it cannot be nonexistent. (*Liber apologeticus*, I)

From this passage Adams draws the following premise for his reconstruction of Anselm's argument (understanding 'God' to be short for 'something than which nothing greater can be conceived'):

(1) Necessarily, if God exists then God necessarily exists.

To this premise Adams adds a second premise from the above passage, a premise which Adams identifies as an instantiation of Brouwer's Axiom, a "somewhat controversial" axiom of modal logic:

(2) If God does not exist, then necessarily it is not necessary that God exist.

One additional premise is needed, one which, Adams writes, "Anselm obviously meant his readers to supply," namely, the assumption "that the existence of a being than which nothing greater can be thought is at least possible." Thus:

(3) It is not necessary that God does not exist.

With those three premises, plus some principles of modal logic, Adams produces a valid argument for the conclusion that, necessarily, God exists.

Robert Adams compares the argument he has reconstructed with a well-known modal argument proposed by Charles Hartshorne²⁰ and contrasts them both with the reasoning in *Proslogion 2* "ontological" argument." He says that,

unlike the argument of *Proslogion 2*, they need not depend on any assumptions at all about the relation of existence to predication. They do not presuppose that things which do not really exist can have predicates. They do not presuppose that existence, or existence in reality, is a predicate, nor even that necessary existence is a predicate. For their structure does not depend on predicate logic at all, but only on modal and nonmodal propositional logic.²¹

Adams thinks these differences mark an advantage for the modal argument he has reconstructed over the argument in *Proslogion 2*. But he takes a position quite like that of Leibniz in insisting that both arguments require the assumption that God's existence is possible. "I think it is correct to say," he adds, that although the modal argument for the existence of God helps us to see that the question of possibility is the crucial question about logically necessary divine existence, neither the modal nor the ontological argument [that is, the argument in *Proslogion 2*] provides us with grounds for answering it."²²

David Lewis has offered a much-discussed modal ontological argument²³ that does take its initial inspiration from *Proslogion 2* but moves quickly to translate it into possible-world semantics. Thus Lewis's first premise is "Whatever exists in the understanding can be conceived to exist in reality." Lewis understands this to mean "For any understandable being x, there is a world w such that x exists in w." Lewis, being a modal realist, supposes that things not in the actual world, but in other possible worlds, also exist. So he can make sense of Anselm's distinction between existing in the understanding alone and existing in reality as well. (Of course, only a limited number of things that exist in any possible world, including the actual one, have ever been thought about and so, in Anselm's way of putting matters, exist in the understanding.)

On the other hand, Lewis's modal realism leads him to deny that what we think of as the actual world has any special character, and so it leads him to reject this crucial premise of the ontological argument as he reconstructs it: "There is an understandable being *x*, such that for no world *w* and being *y* does the greatness of *y* in *w* exceed the greatness of *x* in the actual world." Here is part of Lewis's reasoning:

Think of the ontological arguer in some dismally mediocre world—there are such ontological arguers—arguing that his world alone is actual, hence special, hence a fitting place of greatest greatness, hence a world wherein something exists than which no greater can be conceived to exist. He is wrong to argue thus. So are we."²⁴

Alvin Plantinga, who has offered one of the recently most discussed modal arguments for God's existence, begins his chapter on "God and Necessity" in *The Nature of Necessity*²⁵ with a full quotation of *Proslogion 2*. Plantinga then turns what he considers to be the core of Anselm's reasoning into talk of logically possible worlds and, after a number of intermediate steps, finally ends up with the following, as we might say "stripped-down" version of the argument:

Where 'unsurpassable greatness' is equivalent to 'maximal excellence in every possible world,'

(42) There is a possible world in which unsurpassable greatness is exemplified.

(43) The proposition *a thing has unsurpassable greatness if and only if it has maximal excellence in every possible world* is necessarily true.

(44) The proposition *whatever has maximal excellence is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect* is necessarily true.

[Therefore]

(45) *Possesses unsurpassable greatness* is instantiated in every world.²⁶

The interested reader is invited to read Chapter 10 of Plantinga's classic work to see in detail how Plantinga motivates his movement from the text of *Proslogion 2* to the "stripped-down argument" above. In the end Plantinga concedes, however, that this argument, for all its merits, "is not a successful piece of natural theology." The reason is, he says, that there are many properties, possibly instantiated, whose instantiation is incompatible with maximal greatness. So we need to know whether there is indeed a possible world in which maximal excellence in every possible world is exemplified, that is, whether it is possible that God, so understood, exists.

Peter van Inwagen has a somewhat different criticism of Plantinga's argument, and, indeed, of all ontological arguments for the existence of God. Even a minimal ontological argument, he insists, must presuppose that the property of existing at every possible world is compatible with the property of being a concrete entity, that is, something "we can see, hear, be cut or burned by, love, hate, worship, make, mend, trust in, fear, [or] covet."²⁷ Van Inwagen maintains, not only that we don't, in fact, know whether the property of necessary existence is compatible with the property of being a concrete entity, but that we *cannot* know whether they are compatible. If we cannot know whether the existence of God, as traditionally conceived, is thus even possible, then, it seems, any ontological argument will fail.

Graham Oppy has recently published a masterful summary and critical assessment²⁸ of the huge body of recent literature on Anselm's original argument, and the many related arguments it has inspired.

Oppy's impressive work gives remarkable testimony to the high level of logical, philosophical, and scholarly understanding that has gone into recent discussion of Anselmian-types of reasoning concerning knowledge of the existence of God. From his book we learn in rich detail that modern counterparts to Anselm's Fool, on whose behalf Gaunilo first wrote, have become, if not wise fools, certainly very sophisticated ones.

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¹ Bertrand Russell, "My Intellectual Development," P. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, 2nd ed., New York: Tudor, 1946, 10.

² New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945, 417.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ More carefully, he thought, we couldn't meaningfully and truly say of anything that it *is not*. For him 'is not' includes 'doesn't exist,' but also 'is not F,' for example, 'is not wise.' Thus he thought, not only that we couldn't get away with saying truly and meaningfully, "Socrates does not exist," but equally, "Socrates is not wise," on the grounds that the latter amounts to "Wise Socrates doesn't exist." (See Montgomery Furth, "Elements of Eleatic Ontology," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 6 (1968), 111-32.)

⁵ 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God," is the first verse of both *Psalms* 14 and *Psalms* 53.

⁶ Cf. Dicker [1988], esp. 200-01.

⁷ O. K. Bouwsma, in Bouwsma [1984], suggests that the psalmist's fool might be someone who "stands grim at the door [of the temple], looking in upon those old men in their little black caps," but he does not go in. (Bouwsma [1984], 56)

⁸ "Anselm's Ontological Arguments," *Philosophical Review* 69 (1960), 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44. This is a quote from Norman Kemp Smith's translation of Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason* (London, 1929), 505.

¹⁰ Kemp Smith, 504.

¹¹ *Pro insipiente* 6.

¹² Cf. Plantinga [1974b], 91ff.

¹³ But see my "Aquinas on Saying that God Doesn't Exist," *The Monist* 47 (1963), 472-77.

¹⁴ ST 1a.q2.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, 49.

¹⁶ For a full discussion of Leibniz's attempts to show that the existence of God is possible see Adams [1994], 135-213

¹⁷ Cf. Gareth B. Matthews, "On Conceivability in Anselm and Malcolm," *Philosophical Review* 70 (1961), 110-11.

¹⁸ Alice Ambrose and Morris Lazerowitz, "Assuming the Logically Impossible," *Metaphilosophy* 15 (1984), 93.

¹⁹ Adams [1971], 41-48.

²⁰ Hartshorne [1962], 50-51.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

²² *Ibid.*, 48.

²³ Lewis [1970].

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁵ Plantinga [1974a], 197-221.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 216.

²⁷ Van Inwagen [1977], 380.

²⁸ Oppy [1995].