

Handout 5: Anselm's Ontological Argument

I. Background

Anselm's Definition:

'God' means "something than which nothing greater can be thought."

Anselm's Distinction:

<u>Existence in the Understanding</u>	vs.	<u>Existence in Reality</u>
Santa Claus		you
Middle Earth		me
ghosts		The Eiffel Tower
The Loch Ness Monster		The Moon
you		
me		
The Eiffel Tower		
The Moon		

The Problem of Negative Existentials:

The problem of explaining how a "negative existential" — a sentence of the form 'X does not exist' — can be both *meaningful* and *true*? For it would seem that, for a negative existential to be meaningful, every word in it must stand for something; but if the subject of the sentence ('X') stands for something, then what it stands for *exists*. But then the sentence can't be true, since the sentence is saying that that thing doesn't exist.

An Anselmian Solution to the Problem of Negative Existentials:

Statements of the form 'X does not exist' are true just in case the subject 'X' refers to something that (i) exists in the understanding, but (ii) does not exist in reality.

II. The Argument

As. Assumption for *reductio*: God does not exist.

C1. Therefore, God exists in the understanding but not in reality.

[from (As.) and the Anselmian Solution to the Problem of Negative Existentials]

C2. Therefore, there is something with the following two features: (i) it exists only in the understanding, and (ii) it is something than which nothing greater can be thought.

[from (C1) and definition of God]

P1. But nothing can have features (i) and (ii) — i.e., nothing that exists only in the understanding can be the greatest conceivable being.

C3. Therefore, God exists.

[from (C2) and (P1), by *reductio ad absurdum*]

The justification of P1:

Anselm's Thesis about Greatness:

If x and y are exactly alike in all respects except for the fact that x exists only in the understanding and y exists both in reality as well as in the understanding, then y is greater than x.

III. Objections

A. Gaunilo's Lost Island

Gaunilo's Definition:

'The Lost Island' means an island than which no greater island can be thought.

Gaunilo's Parody Argument

As. Assumption for *reductio*: The Lost Island does not exist.

C1. Therefore, the Lost Island exists in the understanding but not in reality.

[from (As.) and the Anselmian Solution to the Problem of Negative Existentials]

C2. Therefore, there is something with the following two features: (i) it exists only in the understanding, and (ii) it is an island than which no greater island can be thought.

[from (C1) and definition of 'the Lost Island']

P1. But nothing can have features (i) and (ii) – i.e., nothing that exists only in the understanding can be the greatest conceivable island.

C3. Therefore, the Lost Island exists.

[from (C2) and (P1), by *reductio ad absurdum*]

Plantinga's Reply:

Anselm's proper reply, it seems to me, is that it's impossible that there be such an island. The idea of an island than which it's not possible that there be a greater is like the idea of a natural number than which it's not possible that there be a greater There neither is nor could be a greatest possible natural number And the same goes for islands. No matter how great an island is, no matter how many Nubian maidens and dancing girls adorn it, there could always be a greater – one with twice as many, for example. The qualities that make for greatness in islands – number of palm trees, amount and quality of coconuts, for example – most of these qualities *have no intrinsic maximum*. That is, there is no degree of productivity or number of palm trees (or of dancing girls) such that it is impossible that an island display more of that quality. So the idea of a greatest possible island is an inconsistent or incoherent idea; it's not possible that there be such a thing. ... so that argument fails"

– Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (1974), pp. 90-91

B. Kant's Objection (see next handout ...)