
The Ontological Argument

An *A Priori* Route
to God's Existence?

The Original Statement

♦ Therefore, O Lord, who grants understanding to faith, grant to me that, insofar as you know it to be expedient, I may understand that you are as we believe, and you are what we believe. And indeed we believe you to be that than which nothing greater could be conceived (*aliquid quo nihil majus cogitari possit*). Is there, then, no such nature, since 'The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God'? [Psalm 14:1; 53:1] But certainly this very fool, when he hears of the thing which I call 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived', understands what he hears; and what he understands is in his intellect [*in intellectu*], even if he does not understand that it exists. For it is one thing for something to exist in the intellect, another to understand that the thing exists. For when a painter thinks of what he will paint, he has it in his intellect, but does not yet understand it to exist, because he has not yet painted it. When however he has already painted it, he both has it in his intellect and understands it to exist, because he has already painted it. Therefore even the fool is convinced that there is in his intellect something than which nothing greater can be conceived, because when he hears this phrase he understands it, and whatever is understood exists in the intellect. And indeed that than which no greater thing can be conceived cannot exist in the intellect alone. For if a thing is in the intellect alone, it can be thought to exist in actual fact [in re] as well, which is greater. If therefore that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists only in the intellect, that than which nothing greater can be conceived is something than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this certainly cannot be the case. Therefore there undoubtedly exists something than which no greater thing can be conceived, both in the intellect and in actual fact." —Anselm (*Proslogion 2, RR, 30*)

A First Formulation

1. Suppose God, a being greater than which none is possible, exists only in the understanding and not in reality.
2. Even then, God *might* have existed in reality as well as in the understanding. (God is a possible being.)
3. If something exists only in the understanding and might have existed in reality, then it might have been greater than it is.
4. So, God might have been greater than God is (1, 2, 3).
5. If (4), then there might have been a being greater than the being than which none greater is possible.
6. (5), which is incoherent, follows from (4), which in turn follows from (1), (2) and (3).
7. Therefore, either (1), (2), or (3) is false.
8. (2) and (3) are true.
9. Therefore, (1) is false: it is false that God exists only in the understanding and not in reality (6, 7).
 - ♦ That is to say, then, that God exists in reality as well as in the understanding—God exists.

Some Observations

- ♦ The argument is wholly *a priori* in character:
 - ♦ Its premisses, if justified at all, are justified on the basis of non-empirical considerations.
- ♦ The argument strategy is indirect:
 - ♦ It is, in fact, a reduction to a contradiction (*reductio ad impossibilem*)
- ♦ The argument presupposes a kind of *hierarchy of being*.
 - ♦ Anselm assumes, rightly or wrongly, that existing in reality is somehow greater than existing in the intellect alone.

Its *a priori* Character

- ❖ The argument, unlike, say, the argument from motion, does not rely upon any claim justified by appeal to experience.
- ❖ This leads some critics to cast aspersion on it.
 - ❖ In its weakest form, this is the ‘hey-you-can’t-do-that objection’
 - ❖ To this the only suitable response for Anselm to make is this: ‘If I can’t, then I didn’t; and if I didn’t, the argument is either invalid or contains a false premiss. Which is it?’

Its Indirect Character

- ❖ This is a style of proof favoured by scientists and mathematicians, as well as logicians and other philosophers, usually beginning with an assumption, the postulation of which leads either to a palpable absurdity (*reductio ad absurdum*) or an outright contradiction (*reductio ad impossibilem*).
 - ❖ When the absurdity or contradiction emerges, the result is that the original assumption must be rejected, and its negation accepted.
 - ❖ *Reductio ad absurdum*: Suppose everything which exists is material. If so, then everything which exists has both mass and weight. Shadows exist. So, it follows that shadows have have both mass and weight. If shadows have weight, then scales will register an increase when shadows are cast upon them. That’s absurd. So, it’s not the case that everything which exists is material.
 - ❖ *Reductio ad impossibilem*: Suppose there is a lowest rational number n above zero. Every rational number n can be divided by 2, yielding $1/2n$, lower, then, than n . So, if there is a lowest rational number above zero, then there is a number above zero lower than n , namely $1/2n$. So, if there is a lowest rational number above zero, it both is and is not the lowest rational number above zero. So, there is no such number.

Hierarchy of Being

- ❖ Premiss (3) reflects some such commitment:
 - ❖ (3) If something exists only in the understanding and might have existed in reality, then it might have been greater than it is.
- ❖ This thought may be more or less fancy:
 - ❖ More fancy: objective reality (existing in the intellect) is a lower grade of reality than formal reality (existing in the extra-mental sphere).
 - ❖ Less fancy: Only what actually exists has causal power—and having causal power is greater than lacking it.

The Argument Restated

1. Suppose God, a being greater than which none is possible, exists only in the understanding and not in reality.
2. Even then, God might have existed in reality as well as in the understanding. (God is a possible being.)
3. If something exists only in the understanding and might have existed in reality, then it might have been greater than it is.
4. So, God might have been greater than God is (1, 2, 3).
5. If (4), then there might have been a being greater than the being than which none greater is possible.
6. (5), which is incoherent, follows from (4), which in turn follows from (1), (2) and (3).
7. Therefore, either (1), (2), or (3) is false.
8. (2) and (3) are true.
9. Therefore, (1) is false: it is false that God exists only in the understanding and not in reality (6, 7).
10. That is to say, then, that God exists in reality as well as in the understanding—God exists.

Assessing the Argument I

- ❖ The argument is plainly valid.
- ❖ Is each of its premisses true?
 - ❖ If there is a problem, it must be in (2) or (3):
 - ❖ Everything follows from (1), (2), and (3).
 - ❖ (1) is our supposition; so, it's not up for grabs.
 - ❖ That leaves only (2) and (3).

Assessing the Argument II

- ❖ Premiss (2)
 - ❖ Even then, God might have existed in reality as well as in the understanding. (God is a possible being.)
 - ❖ This premiss does not presuppose that one who has an idea of God understands all there is to understand about God. *S* may have an idea of Vienna without knowing all there is to know about Vienna.
 - ❖ Still, it is difficult to determine immediately whether God is a possible being: this is not the innocent premiss it may seem to be.
- ❖ Premiss (3)
 - ❖ If something exists only in the understanding and might have existed in reality, then it might have been greater than it is.
 - ❖ This involves the hierarchy thesis.
 - ❖ That thesis may or may not be plausible, but at a minimum it requires further explanation and defence.

Gaunilo on Behalf of the Fool

- ❖ '...they say that there is in the ocean somewhere an island which, because of the difficulty (or rather the impossibility) of finding that which does not exist, some have called the 'Lost Island.' And the story goes that it is blessed with all manner of priceless riches and delights in abundance ...and ...is superior everywhere in abundance to all those other lands that men inhabit. Now, if anyone tell me that it is like this, I shall easily understand what is said, since nothing is difficult about it. But if he should then go on to say, as though it were a logical consequence of this: You cannot any more doubt that this island that is more excellent than all other lands truly exists somewhere in reality than you can doubt that it is in your mind; and since it is more excellent to exist not only in the mind alone but also in reality, therefore it must needs be that it exists. For if it did not exist, any other land existing in reality would be more excellent than it, and so this island, already conceived by you to be more excellent than others, will not be more excellent. If, I say, someone wishes thus to persuade me that this island really exists beyond all doubt, I should either think that he was joking, or I should find it hard to decide which of us I ought to judge the bigger fool - I, if I agreed with him, or he, if he thought that he had proved the existence of this island ...'

Gaunilo's Argument Developed

1. Suppose a Perfect Island (PI), an island greater than which no other island is possible, exists only in the understanding and not in reality.
2. Even then, PI might have existed in reality as well as in the understanding. (PI is a possible being.)
3. If something exists only in the understanding and might have existed in reality, then it might have been greater than it is.
4. So, PI might have been greater than PI is (1, 2, 3).
5. If (4), then there might have been an island greater than the island than which no greater island is possible.
6. (5), which is incoherent, follows from (4), which in turn follows from (1), (2) and (3).
7. Therefore, either (1), (2), or (3) is false.
8. (2) and (3) are true.
9. Therefore, (1) is false: it is false that PI exists only in the understanding and not in reality (6, 7).
10. That is to say, then, that PI exists in reality as well as in the understanding—PI exists.

A Response to Gaunilo

- ◊ Premise (2) of Gaunilo's argument is false:
 - ◊ This says, in effect, *possibly there is a perfect island* . . .
 - ◊ This, though, is false.
- ◊ One cannot conceive of a perfect island, since perfection, as understood by Anselm, pertains only to entities with *intrinsic maximums*.
- ◊ Compare, e.g.:
 - ◊ There is a perfect circle.
 - ◊ This would be a closed-plane geometrical figure each of whose points was equidistant from a single point.
 - ◊ There is a perfect hockey player.
 - ◊ This would be a player who scored how many goals? . . . skated how fast? . . . had lost how many teeth?