

# Anselm's *Proslogion*

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## *Ontology*

- Much of metaphysics concerns *ontology*, theories about what is real and what is not real.
- One ontological question discussed thus far has been whether Platonic Forms are real.
  - Plato held that the Forms are real,
  - Aristotle denied the reality of the Forms.
- The other ontological question we have looked at is whether a God exists.
- We have seen some attempted proofs of God's existence by Aquinas, whose approach is modeled on Aristotle's.
- Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) was among the first to give a philosophical argument for the existence of a Christian God.

## *Two Ways of Existing*

- We can say that the objects of our thought or conception exist in the understanding.
- A being that exists in the understanding will be said to exist<sub>0</sub>.
- A being that exists independently of the understanding ("in reality") will be said to exist<sub>1</sub>.
  - Homer exists<sub>1</sub>.
  - Odysseus (the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*) exists<sub>0</sub>, but does not exist<sub>1</sub>,
- In general, existing<sub>0</sub> does not guarantee existing<sub>1</sub>, as such a thing might exist only in the understanding.
- Is there anything which, if it exists<sub>0</sub>, must exist<sub>1</sub>?
- Anselm argued that there is such a being—God.

### *The Fool*

- “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Psalms, 14:1).
- Anselm stated that “It was a fool against whom my argument in the Proslogium was directed” (Reply to Guanilo).
- The argument is supposed to show that to deny the existence of God is foolish.
- More precisely, the conclusion is that anyone who understands what God is (and so for whom God exists<sub>0</sub>) cannot consistently deny that God exists<sub>1</sub>.
- “Why, then, has the fool said in his heart, there is no God, since it is so evident, to a rational mind, that you do exist in the highest degree of all. Why, except that he is dull and a fool?”

### *That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Conceived*

- The first move in the argument is the definition of what God is.
- God is “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived” (called “NGC” in what follows).
- Then the claim against the fool is that if he can conceive of an NGC, denying its existence<sub>1</sub> would be inconsistent.
- The next step would be that if it is inconsistent to deny the existence<sub>1</sub> of an NGC, then an NGC exists.
- If Anselm is right, then God’s existence<sub>1</sub> follows from the very conception of God as an NGC.
- This is the first version of what Kant would in the eighteenth century call the “ontological proof” of the existence of God.

### *Conceiving of Non-Existent Objects*

- Every object of conception exists<sub>0</sub> in the understanding.
- Anselm’s argument assumes that whatever is conceived as existing<sub>0</sub> in the understanding can be conceived as existing<sub>1</sub> in reality outside the understanding.
- Anyone who can conceive of x can conceive of x as existing<sub>1</sub> (Thesis “E”).
  - I can conceive of Odysseus, so I can conceive of Odysseus as existing<sub>1</sub>.
- We will take this thesis to be uncontroversial.
- It follows from thesis “E” that if a thinker S can conceive of an NGC, then S can conceive of an NGC as existing<sub>1</sub>.

### *Conceiving Something Greater than Something*

- The heart of the argument is the comparison of the degree of greatness of what is conceived.
- Greatness can be considered in one of two ways:
  - Qualitatively,
  - Existentially.
- Examples of relative qualitative greatness would include being better, more powerful, more knowledgeable, etc.
- Anselm claims that existence<sub>1</sub> is existentially greater than existence<sub>0</sub>.
  - “For suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality, which is greater.”
- Relative existential greatness is at least partially captured by the following (Thesis “G”):
  - Whatever can be conceived as existing<sub>1</sub> can be conceived to be greater than what exists<sub>0</sub> but does not exist<sub>1</sub> (Thesis “G”).

### *Anselm’s Argument*

- Anselm’s argument is stated in the following way.
  1. Suppose someone S (e.g., “the fool”) denies that an NGC exists<sub>1</sub>.
  2. Anyone who denies that something exists<sub>1</sub> conceives of it and it exists<sub>0</sub> in that person’s understanding.
  3. So, an NGC exists<sub>0</sub> in S’s understanding. [1,2]
  4. Suppose an NGC is conceived by S not to exist<sub>1</sub>.
  5. If an object x that exists<sub>0</sub> in one’s understanding is conceived not to exist<sub>1</sub> then it is possible for S to conceive an object y that is greater than x (i.e., one which exists<sub>1</sub>). [G]
  6. So, it is possible for S to conceive an object that is greater than an NGC. [4,5]
  7. So, it is possible for S to conceive an object that is greater than something than which nothing greater can be conceived, which is absurd. [6, definition of NGC]
  8. So, an NGC cannot be conceived by S not to exist<sub>1</sub>. [3-7, *Reductio*]
  9. So, if S denies that an NGC exists<sub>1</sub>, then S cannot conceive an NGC as not existing<sub>1</sub>. [1-8]

### *Guanilo's Reconstruction of the Argument*

- Guanilo substitutes for an NGC “a being that is greater than all beings” (BGB).
  1. If S denies that a BGB exists<sub>1</sub>, then S has a BGB in S's understanding, i.e. a BGB exists<sub>0</sub>.
  2. Existing<sub>1</sub> is greater than existing<sub>0</sub>. [G]
  3. Suppose S denies that a BGB exists<sub>1</sub>.
  4. So, for S, a BGB exists<sub>0</sub> and does not exist<sub>1</sub>. [1,3]
  5. Some things which are not a BGB exist<sub>1</sub>.
  6. So, for S, there is something greater than a BGB. [2,4,5]
  7. So, for S, a BGB is not a BGB, which is absurd. [Definition of “BGB”]
  8. So, S's denial that a BGB exists<sub>1</sub> is absurd. [3-7, *Reductio*]

### *Guanilo's Parallel Argument*

- Let “MEI” stand for the most excellent island, an island than which no greater island can be conceived.
  1. If S denies that a MEI exists<sub>1</sub>, then S has a MEI in S's understanding, i.e. a MEI exists<sub>0</sub>.
  2. Existing<sub>1</sub> is greater than existing<sub>0</sub>. [G]
  3. Suppose S denies that a MEI exists<sub>1</sub>.
  4. So, for S, a MEI exists<sub>0</sub> and does not exist<sub>1</sub>. [1,3]
  5. Some island which is not a MEI exists<sub>1</sub>.
  6. So, for S, there is an island that is not an MEI greater than a MEI. [2,4,5]
  7. So, for S, a MEI is not a MEI, which is absurd. [Definition of “MEI”]
  8. So, S's denial that a MEI exists<sub>1</sub> is absurd. [3-7, *Reductio*]
- The conclusion of this argument is false, so Anselm's argument, which has a parallel structure, is not valid.

### *Anselm's Response to Guanilo's Parallel Argument*

- Anselm's response is that the reasoning for the existence<sub>1</sub> of an NGC cannot be applied to any other being than an NGC.
- The problem lies in step 7, which holds that it is absurd that something can be greater than a most excellent island.

- It is consistent to say that an existing<sub>1</sub> island is greater than any conceivable island that does not exist<sub>1</sub>.
  - Although an MEI is qualitatively greater than any existing<sub>0</sub> island, an existing island is existentially greater than any existing<sub>0</sub> island.
- But it is not consistent to say that there is anything existing<sub>1</sub> that is greater than something than which nothing greater can be conceived.
- An NGC is conceived of as being both qualitatively and existentially greater than anything else.
  - So, nothing that exists<sub>1</sub> and is not an NGC is greater than an NGC, since it would be qualitatively less than an NGC.

*A More Detailed Reconstruction of the Argument*

- A few further theses are needed before the argument can be presented in a more detailed form.
  - If something can be conceived to be greater than x, then x is not an NGC (Thesis “N”).
  - An NGC can be conceived (Thesis “T”).
  - If something must be conceived as existing<sub>1</sub>, then it exists<sub>1</sub> (Thesis “M”).
- Thesis N is uncontroversial, but theses T and M can be and have been disputed.

*First Part of the Argument: Conception*

1. Suppose S can conceive of an NGC as existing<sub>0</sub> without existing<sub>1</sub>.
2. So, S can conceive of an NGC as existing<sub>1</sub>. [1, E]
3. The conception of an NGC as existing<sub>1</sub> is the conception of something greater than what exists<sub>0</sub> without existing<sub>1</sub>. [G]
4. So, S can conceive of something greater than an NGC that exists<sub>0</sub> without existing<sub>1</sub>. [2,3]
5. So, the conception of an NGC as existing<sub>0</sub> without existing<sub>1</sub> is not the conception of an NGC. [4, N]
6. So, S can conceive of an NGC which is not conceived as an NGC, which is absurd. [1, 5]
7. So, S cannot conceive of an NGC as existing<sub>0</sub> without existing<sub>1</sub>. [1-6, *Reductio*]

*Second Part of the Argument: Existence*

1. S cannot conceive of an NGC as existing<sub>0</sub> without existing<sub>1</sub>. [Part 1]
2. So, if S can conceive of an NGC, then S must conceive of an NGC as existing<sub>1</sub>. [1]
3. S can conceive of an NGC as existing<sub>1</sub>. [T]
4. So, S must conceive of an NGC as existing<sub>1</sub>. [2,3]
5. If an NGC must be conceived as existing<sub>1</sub>, then an NGC exists<sub>1</sub>. [M]
6. So, an NGC exists<sub>1</sub>. [3, 4, 5]

*Criticisms of the Argument*

- The argument appears to be valid, in the sense that if the theses invoked in it are true, the conclusion must be true as well.
- Criticism of the argument is to be directed at the three controversial theses, T, M and G.
- Each of these has been called into question by philosophers.

*Criticisms of Thesis T*

- Some critics have questioned Thesis T, according to which an NGC can be thought.
- Guanilo thought that our conceptions of things must be drawn from real things that are already known.
- Leibniz in the seventeenth century noted that it is difficult to tell whether the conception of a greatest being is consistent.
  - For example, he tried to prove that the analogous notion of a fastest speed is not consistent.
- One could also demand an account of the nature of existential greatness.
- One might reject the very notion of existential greatness: that existence<sub>1</sub> is greater than existence<sub>0</sub>, as will be discussed below.

### *Criticism of Thesis M*

- According to Thesis M, if one must conceive something as existing<sub>1</sub>, then that thing does exist<sub>1</sub>.
- It could be objected that reality is not governed by what we must conceive.
- Guanilo wonders whether he might be said to have in his understanding “any number of false things that have no real existence at all in themselves,” just by understanding what someone says.
- Aquinas claims that if someone understands that ‘God’ signifies the NGC, “it does not therefore follow that what the word signifies exists actually, but only that it exists mentally” (*Summa Theologica*, Q. 2, Art. 1).

### *A Miserable Tautology?*

- We might understand Aquinas’s claim as follows.
- The basis of Anselm’s response to Guanilo is that an NGC must be both qualitatively and existentially greater than any other thing.
- But if it is part of the concept of an NCG that it is existentially greater than any other thing, then since other things exist<sub>1</sub>, an NCG must exist<sub>1</sub>.
- So it is true to say that one cannot consistently conceive of an NCG without conceiving it to exist<sub>1</sub>.
- But this claim is then, as Kant called it, “a miserable tautology” (*Critique of Pure Reason*).
- Why would thesis M apply, when the only reason we must think of an NGC as existing<sub>1</sub> is because existing<sub>1</sub> is simply a part of what it is to be an NGC?

### *Criticism of Thesis G*

- The existential part of thesis G is perhaps the most controversial of all.
- The thesis states that whatever can be thought as existing<sub>1</sub> can be thought to be greater than what is thought as existing<sub>0</sub> but not existing<sub>1</sub>.
- The most famous objection to this principle was lodged by Kant.
- Kant claimed that the only relative measure of “greatness” is qualitative.
- To think that something exists<sub>1</sub> adds nothing to the thought of what the thing is.
- Thus, my thought of \$10 as existing<sub>1</sub> in my pocket is not a thought of something greater than the mere thought of \$10 in my pocket.

### *Conclusion*

- We have looked in some detail at a reconstruction of Anselm's argument of Chapter 2.
- The theses on which the reconstructed arguments are based were criticized.
- There are several possible outcomes of the criticism:
  - Accept the criticisms and reconstruction, and decide that the argument does not establish what it was intended to establish.
  - Reject the reconstruction of the argument as being unfaithful to the text.
  - Reject the criticisms as failing to undermine the premises.
  - Re-fashion the argument so as to avoid the criticisms,
  - Look for some better argument in the Anselm text.
- The "ontological proof" was presented in different versions in the seventeenth century by Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz.