

Anselm's Ontological Argument

St. Anselm (c.1033-1109) is widely regarded as the father of scholastic philosophy. From 1093, Anselm was Archbishop of Canterbury, though he spent much time in exile as a consequence of disputes with secular rulers. While he conducted a range of linguistic and analytical investigations, Anselm is perhaps best known for his proof of the existence and nature of God in the *Proslogion*, a work that appeared in 1078, at the time that he was prior of the Benedictine Abbey of Bec in Normandy.

There is disagreement about the structure and purpose of the *Proslogion*. I think that Anselm attempts to prove the existence of 'that than which no greater can be conceived' in Chapter 2, and then, in Chapter 3, tries to show that 'that than which no greater can be conceived' cannot even be conceived not to exist. In subsequent chapters, Anselm goes on to attempt to demonstrate a further range of attributes of 'that than which no greater can be conceived'. On this account, Chapter 2 contains the proof of the existence of a being that one might suspect is God; the rest of the work establishes that the being whose existence is established in Chapter 2 is, indeed, God.

Some interpreters claim that there is an independent argument for the existence of God in Chapter 3; other interpreters claim that there is a single argument for the existence of God that is contained in Chapters 2 and 3 together. (Some interpreters even claim that Anselm did not put forward any attempted proofs of the existence of God in the *Proslogion*.) One part of the explanation for this diversity in interpretative opinion is that it is clear that the arguments of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of the *Proslogion* have a formal similarity. In Chapter 2, Anselm argues that the assumption that '*that than which no greater can be conceived*' does not exist (in reality) entails absurdities—whence we can conclude that '*that than which no greater can be conceived*' does exist (in reality). In Chapter 3, Anselm argues that the assumption that '*than than which no greater can be conceived*' can be conceived not to exist (in reality) entails absurdities—whence we can conclude that '*that than which no greater can be conceived*' cannot be conceived not to exist. However, one might think that it is at least *prima facie* plausible to suppose that, if '*that than which no greater can be conceived*' cannot be conceived not to exist, then '*that than which no greater can be conceived*' exists. And, if one does think that, then one will think that the argument in Chapter 3 could also have been used as an independent route to the conclusion of the argument in Chapter 2. (If Anselm thought that there was a good argument from the claim that '*that than which no greater can be conceived*' cannot be conceived not to exist to the claim that '*that than which no greater can be conceived*' exists, he certainly does not set out that argument in the *Proslogion*. I take it that this fact provides significant support for my preferred interpretation of the structure and purpose of the *Proslogion*.)

The key passage in Chapter 2 of the *Proslogion* may be translated as follows (Mann (1972: 260-1), with some minor alterations.):

Thus even the fool is convinced that that than which no greater can be conceived is in the understanding, since when he hears this, he understands it; and whatever is understood is in the understanding. And certainly that than which no greater can be conceived cannot be in the understanding alone. For if it is even in the understanding alone, it can be conceived to exist in reality also, which is greater.

Thus if that than which no greater can be conceived is in the understanding, then that than which no greater can be conceived is itself that than which a greater can be conceived. But surely this cannot be. Thus without doubt that than which a greater cannot be conceived exists, both in the understanding and in reality.

The argument in this passage has two major parts. In the first part, Anselm seems to argue in the following way:

1. When the fool hears the words ‘that than which no greater can be conceived’, he understands those words. (Premise)
2. For any expression ‘E’, if ‘E’ is understood, then E exists in the understanding. (Premise)
3. Hence, that than which no greater can be conceived exists in the understanding. (Conclusion)

As it stands, there seems to be some slippage in this argument between talk of ‘the understanding of the fool’ and ‘the understanding’ (perhaps, say, ‘the generic understanding of humanity’). While this slippage could be resolved in either of two ways, most interpreters choose to resolve this slippage in favour of talk of ‘the understanding’. Adopting this resolution, we can recast the argument as follows:

1. The words ‘that than which no greater can be conceived’ are understood. (Premise)
2. For any expression ‘E’, if ‘E’ is understood, then E exists in the understanding. (Premise)
3. Hence, that than which no greater can be conceived exists in the understanding. (From 1, 2.)

While it seems clear—assuming uniform interpretation of key expressions in the premises and conclusion—that the conclusion of this argument is a logical consequence of the premises, there are various questions that can be asked about the premises. On the one hand, there are questions to be asked about the range of expressions for which it is even *prima facie* plausible to suppose that Premise 2 is true. And, on the other hand, there are questions to be asked about the nature of the theory that is implicit in serious talk about ‘existence in the understanding’.

If we consider substitution instances of the schema ‘E exists in the understanding’, then we see that we only get meaningful outcomes if we restrict substitution instances of ‘E’ to something like referring terms: names, definite descriptions, quantifier phrases, and the like:

- a. Santa Claus exists in the understanding.
- b. The tallest Martian exists in the understanding.
- c. A man than whom none is greater exists in the understanding.
- d. Tailless dragons exist in the understanding.

Other kinds of substitution instances for ‘E’ fail even to yield grammatically well-formed sentences:

- e. Snow is white exists in the understanding.

- f. Because exists in the understanding.
- g. False exists in the understanding.
- h. In the corner exists in the understanding.

However, while failure of this test is surely sufficient to rule out certain kinds of substitution instances, it is not clear whether passing this test suffices to establish that given substitution instances are acceptable: whether or not this is so will depend upon the further details of the account of what it is for something to exist in the understanding.

There are two related questions that arise in connection with Anselm's talk of 'understanding' and 'existence in the understanding'. On the one hand, there are questions about what kind of understanding of an expression 'E' suffices to make it the case that E exists in the understanding. And, on the other hand, there are questions about the development of a theoretical framework that will support talk of 'existence in the understanding'.

Can an expression 'E' be understood even if that expression is demonstrably self-contradictory—'the non-square square'—or demonstrably necessarily uninstantiated—'the greatest prime number'—or merely necessarily uninstantiated—'the actual tallest inhabitant of the planet Mars'?

If we suppose that the answer to this question is 'No!', then it is not uncontroversial that Premise 1 of Anselm's argument is true: if it is necessarily the case that the expression 'that than which no greater can be conceived' is uninstantiated, then neither the fool nor anyone else understands that expression (in the relevant sense). On the plausible assumption that, if the expression 'that than which no greater can be conceived' is uninstantiated, then it is necessarily uninstantiated, it turns out that anyone who supposes that the expression 'that than which no greater can be conceived' is uninstantiated will be required to say that the expression 'that than which no greater can be conceived' cannot be understood in this relevant sense. Consequently, it will *not* turn out that 'even the fool is convinced that that than which no greater can be conceived is in the understanding'. While Anselm might still insist that the fool is wrong about this—because the expression 'that than which no greater can be conceived' is not uninstantiated—it seems that the upshot is nonetheless that Anselm's *argument* turns out to be question-begging: justified acceptance of Premise 1 presupposes justified acceptance of the conclusion of the argument.

If, on the other hand, we suppose that expressions that are demonstrably self-contradictory, or demonstrably necessarily uninstantiated, or otherwise necessarily uninstantiated can nonetheless be understood, then, given Premise 2, we shall be committed to the claim that there are things in the understanding that have self-contradictory—or necessarily jointly uninstantiable—properties in the understanding. Whether this is problematic will then depend upon the further details of our theory of existence and property instantiation in the understanding.

At least in rough outline, it might seem *prima facie* plausible to suppose that the following claims are implicit in Anselm's talk of 'existence in the understanding':

1. There are two domains of objects: reality and the understanding.

2. Some objects belong to exactly one of these domains.
3. Some objects belong to both of these domains.
4. There are no objects that belong to neither domain.
5. Objects that belong to reality do not have logically inconsistent properties, and nor do they suffer from logical incompleteness: in particular, for any pair of a property and the negation of that property, an object that belongs to reality has exactly one of the members of that pair of properties.
6. Objects that belong both to reality and the understanding may have different properties in reality and in the understanding: in particular, objects that belong to the understanding may—for all that has been said so far—have logically inconsistent properties or suffer from logical incompleteness in the understanding.
7. Given that objects that belong both to reality and the understanding may have different properties in reality and in the understanding, it cannot be that it is always sameness of properties that underwrites the *identity* of objects in reality with objects in the understanding (in those cases in which there is one object that exists in both domains).

But even this modest initial round of assumptions leads to serious trouble. If we suppose that an object exists in reality, then, on the assumption that there are different guises under which that object can enter the understanding, it seems that we shall end up being committed to the view that *it*—the object that exists in reality—is *identical* to many different objects that exist in the understanding. That can't be right! Perhaps we might try saying that it is only *in the understanding* that these objects are distinct—but that also seems unsatisfying, not least because it seems pretty clear that we must be supposing that these objects can be distinguished from the theoretical standpoint from which we are elaborating the Anselmian theory.

As an alternative to the above attempt, we might try saying that objects that exist both in the understanding and in reality have *the very same* properties in the understanding that they have in reality. However, if we suppose that the properties that objects that exist in reality have in the understanding are thus radically independent of the way that we conceive of those objects—we can, after all, be massively mistaken in our beliefs about the properties that are in fact possessed by objects that exist in reality—then we might also suppose that we actually have good reason to deny that there can be things in the understanding that have self-contradictory—or necessarily jointly uninstantiable—properties. For how could it be that the understanding is perfectly impervious to false conceptions of actually existing objects, and yet at the same time a sucker for incoherent conceptions of objects that do not actually exist?

I take it that the upshot of the discussion to this point is that it is highly doubtful whether anyone should accept Anselm's claim that *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists in the understanding. At the very least, pending a carefully developed account of existence in the understanding, it seems that the fool is certainly within his rights to refuse to accept the claim that *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists in the understanding—and that is enough to allow the fool to reject Anselm's argument with a clear conscience, and to ensure that Anselm should be able to see that his argument does not show that the fool is irrational on account of his rejection of the existence of *that than which no greater can be conceived*.

Given the nature of the difficulties that we have explored to this point, one might suspect that there will be difficulties in proceeding to examine the rest of Anselm's argument under the pretence that we can accept the claim that *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists in the understanding. Nonetheless, that is what we shall now try to do. On a straightforward reading, the second major part of Anselm's argument seems to run as follows:

1. If *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists in the understanding, then *that than which no greater can be conceived* can be conceived to exist in reality. (Premise)
2. If *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists in reality then *it* is greater than *it* would be if *it* were to exist only in the understanding. (Premise)
3. Hence, if *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists only in the understanding, then it is something than which a greater can be conceived. (From 1, 2)
4. *That than which no greater can be conceived* is not something than which a greater can be conceived. (Premise)
5. Hence, *that than which no greater can be conceived* does not exist only in the understanding. (From 4, 5)

One question that arises immediately concerns the relationship between (a) conceiving objects to possess certain properties and (b) possession of properties by those objects in the understanding. There are two distinct claims here the merit consideration. First, it might be that, when an object is conceived to possess a property, then the object possesses that property in the understanding. Second, it might be that, when an object possesses a property in the understanding, that object is conceived to possess that property. Since these claims are independent, there are four different relationships that might hold between conceiving objects to possess properties and possession of properties by objects in the understanding: exactly one of the distinct claims is true, or both are true, or neither is true.

To further complicate matters, it might be that the claims mentioned at the end of the preceding paragraph hold for all but a distinguished class of properties, rather than for all properties. So, for example, it might be that, while something that is conceived to be red has the property of being red in the understanding, something that is conceived to exist in reality does not have the property of existing in reality in the understanding, because existence in reality is one of the distinguished class of properties for which it fails to be true that, if an object is conceived to possess a property, then the object possesses that property in the understanding. Since it is plausible to suppose that, if there is a distinguished class of properties for which the claims in question fail to hold, then *existence in the understanding* and *existence in reality* will be among those properties, a proper investigation of Anselm's argument really needs to consider at least eight different relationships that might hold between conceiving objects to possess properties and possession of properties by objects in the understanding.

Now, of course, if we suppose that, in the case of objects that exist in reality, the properties that those objects possess in the understanding are radically independent of the way that we conceive of those objects, then we can be quite short with these questions for objects that exist in reality. But, even if we make this supposition, we

are still left to face the above questions in the case of objects that exist only in the understanding. And if we suppose that the properties that objects possess in the understanding do generally depend upon how those objects are conceived, then we are left to face the above questions for all objects. Since a case-by-case analysis is out of the question here, we shall move on to a largely impressionistic discussion of the premises of Anselm's argument.

Is it true that, if *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists in the understanding, then *that than which no greater can be conceived* can be conceived to exist in reality? This claim might not be true if objects in the understanding are *identified* by the properties that they possess, and if the properties of objects in the understanding are *determined* by the way in which those objects are conceived. Moreover, this claim might not be true if existence in the understanding requires coherent conception, and if *that than which no greater can be conceived* can only be coherently conceived to exist in the understanding alone.

Is it true that, if *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists in reality then *it* is greater than *it* would be if *it* were to exist only in the understanding? This claim can only be true if we can make sense of counterfactual claims about what objects that exist in reality would be like if they existed only in the understanding. But it is not entirely clear that we can make sense of such claims if we suppose that objects that exist both in the understanding and in reality have *the very same* properties in the understanding that they have in reality. Moreover, it is not obvious—at least, not to all—that existence in reality is properly thought of as a great-making property. At least some people find it plausible to suppose that the greatness of *that than which no greater can be conceived* does not depend upon whether it exists in reality (though it might depend upon whether it is *conceived* to exist in reality).

Does the interim conclusion at 3. follow from Premises 1. and 2.? That's hard to say. If *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists only in the understanding, then it is certainly the case that *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists in the understanding. Given Premise 1, we can certainly conclude that, if *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists only in the understanding, then *that than which no greater can be conceived* can be conceived to exist in reality. Premise 2 tells us that, if *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists in reality then *it* is greater than *it* would be if *it* were to exist only in the understanding. Does it now follow that if *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists only in the understanding, then it is something than which a greater can be conceived?

Not obviously. Suppose, for example, that we think that the properties that an object has in the understanding depend upon how that object is conceived, and that the properties that an object has in the understanding can differ from the properties that that object has in reality (in those cases in which an object exists both in the understanding and in reality). Suppose, further, that we suppose that *existence in the understanding* and *existence in reality* are properties. Then, we might consistently suppose—for all that has been said to this point—that *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists only in the understanding; that in the understanding *that than which no greater can be conceived* possesses the property of existing in reality (though, of course, since it does not exist in reality, it does not possess that property in reality); that if *that than which no greater can be conceived* existed in reality it would

be greater than it actually is (given that it exists only in the understanding); and that *that than which no greater can be conceived* is the greatest being in the understanding (and hence is such that no greater being than it can be conceived).

It may be that, if we make *other* theoretical choices, it will turn out that 3. does follow from 1. and 2. However, in order to determine whether that is so, there is no alternative but to work through the case-by-case analysis that we are here eschewing. Moreover, it is worth noting that, even if there are cases on which 3. follows from 1. and 2., there might be good reason not to accept the theses that characterise those cases. If the fool can reasonably opt for the kind of case that underlies the analysis in the previous paragraph, then it seems that the fool can reasonably claim that Anselm's argument is simply invalid.

Is it true that *that than which no greater can be conceived* is not something than which a greater can be conceived? Not obviously. If we suppose that the properties that an object has in the understanding do not depend upon how that object is conceived, and if we suppose that existence in reality is a sufficiently weighty great-making property, then we might suppose that, if *that than which no greater can be conceived* does not exist, then, merely by conceiving of a suitable thing that exists in reality, we conceive of a thing that is greater than *that than which no greater can be conceived*.

The upshot of the discussion of Anselm's argument to this point is, I think, that it is not easy to tell whether there is a set of theoretical assumptions—about the understanding, existence in the understanding, property possession in the understanding, the relationship between conceiving objects to possess certain properties and possession of properties by those objects in the understanding, the relationship between believing that objects possess certain properties and conceiving that those objects possess those properties, and so forth—relative to which the conclusion of Anselm's argument follows from the premises of that argument, and relative to which all of the premises of Anselm's argument are true. If it turns out that there is no such set of theoretical assumptions, then it seems that the right thing to say is that Anselm's argument is plainly unacceptable, but that it gains superficial plausibility because of slippage in the interpretation of key terms and slippage in the underlying theoretical assumptions that might be invoked in connection with each of the premises of the argument. On the other hand, if it turns out that there is such a set of theoretical assumptions, then, in order to determine whether the argument is then acceptable, we should at least need to determine whether the set of theoretical assumptions is itself acceptable. If, for example, the fool can reasonably reject *any* set of theoretical assumptions that would render Anselm's argument otherwise acceptable, then it seems that it would still be the case that the argument is ultimately unsuccessful: the argument would still fail to show that the fool is irrational in failing to accept the existence (in reality) of *that than which no greater can be conceived*.

Even if someone is prepared to accept the way that the discussion has gone to this point, such a person might still think that there are other ways in which it can be shown that Anselm's argument is plainly unacceptable. In particular, following the lead of Anselm's earliest critic—the Marmoutier monk Gaunilo, who wrote an almost immediate response *In Behalf of the Fool*—one might think that it can be shown on

entirely independent grounds that Anselm's argument, if successful, would simply prove far too much. For suppose that someone offered the following argument:

Even the fool is convinced that that island than which no greater island can be conceived is in the understanding, since when he hears this, he understands it; and whatever is understood is in the understanding. And certainly that island than which no greater island can be conceived cannot be in the understanding alone. For if it is even in the understanding alone, it can be conceived to exist in reality also, which is greater. Thus if that island than which no greater island can be conceived is in the understanding, then that island than which no greater island can be conceived is itself an island than which a greater island can be conceived. But surely this cannot be. Thus without doubt that island than which a greater island cannot be conceived exists, both in the understanding and in reality.

Surely we are entitled to think that there must be something wrong with this argument—surely we know that there is, in reality, no island than which no greater island can be conceived. Moreover, even if you happen to think that there is, in reality, an island than which no greater island can be conceived, surely you will concede that there are other kinds for which the corresponding claim is not plausible. There is, after all, nothing special about *islands*. If you think it false that there is a member of the Richmond Football Club than which no greater member of the Richmond Football Club can be conceived, then you can consider the variant of Anselm's argument that uses that example instead. (If we pair the latter example with another variant of Anselm's argument for the claim that there is a member of the Carlton Football Club than which no greater member of the Carlton Football Club can be conceived, then you might suspect that we get not merely absurdity but outright contradiction: for what would happen when these two were pitted against one another? A member of the Richmond Football Club than which no greater member of the Richmond Football Club can be conceived would certainly always outplay any member of the Carlton Football Club; and a member of the Carlton Football Club than which no greater member of the Carlton Football Club can be conceived would always outplay any member of the Richmond Football Club!)

In the face of this objection, the proponent of Anselm's argument needs to be able to point to a relevant difference between *that than which no greater can be conceived* and *that F than which no greater F can be conceived* (where 'F' is something other than 'being') that brings it about that, while Anselm's argument goes through, the parallel argument about *that F than which no greater F can be conceived* breaks down. There are not many options.

First, the proponent of Anselm's argument might try saying that, while the expression 'that than which no greater can be conceived' is understood, the expression 'that island than which no greater island can be conceived' is not understood. It is hard to see how this position could be defended. What possible reason could the fool have for allowing that only the former expression is understood?

Second, the proponent of Anselm's argument might try saying that, even if *that island than which no greater island can be conceived* exists in the understanding, it cannot be conceived to exist in reality (although *that than which no greater can be conceived* can be conceived to exist in reality). Again, it is hard to see how this position could be

defended. What possible reason could the fool have for allowing this differential treatment of the two putative denizens of the understanding?

Third, the proponent of Anselm's argument might try saying that, while it is true that, if *that than which no greater can be conceived* exists in reality it is greater than it would be if it were to exist only in the understanding, it is not true that, if *that island than which no greater island can be conceived* exists in reality then it is greater than it would be if it were to exist only in the understanding. But, yet again, it is hard to see how this position could be defended. What possible reason could the fool have—and, more generally, what possible reason could there be—for allowing this differential treatment of the two prospective denizens of reality?

Finally, the proponent of Anselm's argument might try saying that, while *that than which no greater can be conceived* is not something than which a greater can be conceived, *that island than which no greater island can be conceived* is an island than which a greater island can be conceived. But, one final time, it is hard to see how this position could be defended. What possible reason could the fool have—and more generally, what possible reason could there be—for *this* differential treatment of *that than which no greater can be conceived*, and *that island than which no greater island can be conceived*?

Even if it is true that Gaunilo's objection defeats the argument that Anselm actually gave, it should not be thought that this must be the end of the line for Anselm's argument. The discussion to this point has taken the formulation of Anselm's argument entirely at face value: we've stuck to Anselm's actual text—under the particular translation that we've adopted for discussion—and to a straightforwardly literal interpretation of that text. But that leaves at least three kinds of options open.

First, it might be that there are other translations of Anselm's text that would yield better arguments. Second, it might be that there are less literal—more liberal—interpretations of Anselm's text that would yield better arguments. (Perhaps we should note here that there might be other ways of understanding the theoretical framework in which Anselm's argument was meant to be located that also contribute to the production of a better argument.) And, third, it might be that there other arguments that are more or less loosely inspired by—or, at any rate, partial causal products of—Anselm's text, but which yield a more satisfactory argument than the one that we have been considering.

In the time since Anselm produced his original argument, there has been discussion of many different arguments that fit into the three categories introduced in the preceding paragraph. There are many different 'interpretations' of Anselm's text that have been provided in the succeeding centuries; and there are many different 'ontological arguments' that are more or less loosely inspired by—or, at any rate, partial causal products of—Anselm's text.

Here, for example, are some recent 'formulations' of the argument from *Proslogion II*:

Adams (1971)

1. There is a thing x , and a magnitude m , such that x exists in the understanding, m is the magnitude of x , and it is not possible that there is a thing y and a magnitude n such that n is the magnitude of y and $n > m$.
2. For any thing x and magnitude m , if x exists in the understanding, m is the magnitude of x , and it is not possible that there is a thing y and magnitude n such that n is the magnitude of y and $n > m$, then it is possible that x exists in reality.
3. For any thing x and magnitude m , if m is the magnitude of x , and it is not possible that there is a thing y and a magnitude n such that n is the magnitude of y and $n > m$, and x does not exist in reality, then it is not possible that if x exists in reality then there is a magnitude n such that n is greater than m and n is the magnitude of x .
4. (Hence) There is a thing x and a magnitude m such that x exists in the understanding, and x exists in reality, and m is the magnitude of x , and it is not possible that there is a thing y and a magnitude n such that n is the magnitude of y and $n > m$. (From 1, 2, and 3.)

Millican (2004)

1. The phrase ‘a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought’ is clearly understood by the Fool, and apparently makes sense.
2. If a phrase ‘A’ is clearly understood and apparently makes sense, then we can take it to successfully denote some specific nature.
3. A nature which is instantiated in reality is greater than one which is not instantiated in nature.
4. It is obviously impossible to think of a nature that is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought.
5. (Hence), a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought must indeed be instantiated in reality. (From 1, 2, 3, and 4.)

Leftow (2005)

1. Someone thinks of a possible object which is something than which no greater can be thought.
2. If a possible something than which no greater can be thought is thought of but not actual, it could have been greater than it actually is.
3. (So) There actually exists something than which no greater can be thought. (From 1 and 2.)

And here are some examples of ‘ontological arguments’ that are more or less loosely inspired by—or, at any rate, partial causal products of—Anselm’s text:

Curley (1978, expounding Descartes)

1. I have ideas of things that, whether or not they exist, and whether or not I think of them, have true and immutable natures or essences. (Premise)
2. Whatever property I perceive clearly and distinctly as belonging to the true and immutable nature of something I have an idea of really does belong to that thing. (Premise)
3. I have an idea of God as a supremely perfect being. (Premise)

4. I perceive clearly and distinctly that existence belongs to the true and immutable nature of a supremely perfect being. (Premise)
5. (Hence) A supremely perfect being really does exist. (From 1-4)

Plantinga (1974)

1. For any x, x is *maximally excellent* iff x is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good. (Definition)
2. For any x, x is *maximally great* iff x is necessarily existent and maximally excellent. (Definition)
3. It is possible that there is a maximally great entity. (Premise)
4. (Hence) There is a maximally excellent entity. (From 3.)

Anderson (1990, expounding Gödel)

1. For any x, x is *God-like* iff x has as essential properties those and only those properties that are positive. (Definition)
2. For any x, and any A, A is an *essence* of x iff, for every property B, x has B necessarily iff A entails B. (Definition)
3. For any x, x *necessarily exists* iff every essence of x is necessarily exemplified. (Definition)
4. For any property P, if P is positive, then the negation of P is not positive. (Premise)
5. Any property entailed by a positive property is positive. (Premise)
6. The property of being God-like is positive. (Premise)
7. For any property P, if P is positive, then P is necessarily positive. (Premise)
8. Necessary existence is positive. (Premise)
9. (Hence) Necessarily, the property of being God-like is exemplified. (From 4-8)

In my opinion, the only proper response to these arguments is to treat each of them in the way that I treated the argument that I derived from Anselm's text. That is, the only proper response to each of these arguments is to ask, of each of them, (a) whether it is true that the conclusion of the argument is a (logical) consequence of its premises; (b) whether it is true that the premises of the argument have the kind of standing that would make it appropriate to say that the argument really is a proof of its conclusion; and (c) whether it is right to think that the conclusion of the argument suffices to establish the existence of God. Only a careful investigation of these kinds of questions can issue in a fair assessment of these arguments (and, of course, that is not something that we can hope to do in the course of the present investigation, even for the small sample of 'ontological arguments' given above).

Because the proper assessment of arguments is sensitive to the slightest changes in formulations, there are no easy generalisations that can be made about 'ontological arguments'. Some 'ontological arguments' fail because their conclusions are only mistakenly supposed by their proponents to be logical consequences of their premises. Some 'ontological arguments' fail because their premises are only mistakenly supposed by their proponents to have the kind of standing that would make it appropriate to say that they belong to successful arguments. Some ontological arguments fail because they only suffice to establish the existence of some uncontroversial entity that is plainly to be distinguished from God. Moreover, each of

these kinds of failings can take a number of different forms: some ‘ontological arguments’ trade on equivocation; some ‘ontological arguments’ simply involve mistakes in inference; some ‘ontological arguments’ have premises that it is obvious that those who do not believe in God reasonably reject; some ‘ontological arguments’ fail because they have premises that it could only be reasonable to accept if it were reasonable to believe in God; some ‘ontological arguments’ fail because their conclusion establishes no more than that the physical universe exists; and so forth.

While there is a fairly broad consensus that no ‘ontological argument’ that has appeared thus far is a successful argument—and while there is almost universal agreement that no ‘ontological argument’ that has appeared thus far is such that no-one could reject its conclusion on pain of conviction of irrationality—there is considerable disagreement about the future prospects for ‘ontological arguments’. Some philosophers think that there is reason to be optimistic—or, at any rate, not very pessimistic—about the prospects of discovery of a successful ‘ontological argument’. Other philosophers hold that, while it can hardly be ruled out *a priori* that there is a successful ‘ontological argument’, there is good reason—based both in the failings detected in ‘ontological arguments’ that have been hitherto been produced and in independent reasons for thinking that God does not exist—to think that it is highly unlikely that there are any such arguments. Yet other philosophers think that there are good *a priori* reasons for supposing that there simply cannot be successful ‘ontological arguments’.

There are two kinds of strategies that might be pursued by those who think that there are good *a priori* reasons for supposing that there simply cannot be successful ‘ontological arguments’. On the one hand, such philosophers might try to argue that it is clear that every possible ‘ontological argument’ is vulnerable to a Gaunilo-style critique. On the other hand, such philosophers might try to argue that every possible ‘ontological argument’ must try to do something that is *a priori* impossible—e.g. build an *a priori* bridge between the realm of concepts and the realm of actually existing objects—or appeal to a principle that is *a priori* indefensible—e.g. the claim that existence is a real or genuine property of things.

Notoriously, Immanuel Kant declared that we can know *a priori* that ontological proof of the existence of God is impossible. Many people, in the centuries that have passed since Kant wrote on this topic, have been happy to declare that Kant showed that ‘ontological arguments’ fail—or that ‘the ontological argument’ fails—because ‘existence is not a real predicate’. However, when we look closely at what Kant has to say in the Second Division, Book II, Chapter III, Part 4 of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, it is very hard to see how to so much as *apply* what he says there to most of the examples in the selection of ‘ontological arguments’ set out above.

Kant’s critique of ‘the famous ontological argument of Descartes’ draws on his own controversial views about concepts, judgments, predicates, possibilities, his analytic/synthetic distinction, objects, experience, existence, and so forth. Moreover, Kant’s critique is not developed in connection with a specific formulation of ‘the famous ontological argument of Descartes’: in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant does not exhibit a particular formulation of the Cartesian argument and then say where exactly it is that the particular formulation falls down. Rather, what Kant does is to argue—in various different ways—that there is no way in which one can move *a*

priori from the concept of an object to the justified belief that there is an object that falls under the concept. Hence, in particular, according to Kant, there is no way in which one can move *a priori* from the concept of a supremely perfect being—or the concept of *that than which no greater can be conceived*—to the justified belief that a supremely perfect being—or *that than which no greater can be conceived*—exists.

Should we suppose that the ‘ontological arguments’ set out above involve *a priori* movement from concept to belief? Consider, for example, Plantinga’s argument. Setting aside the two definitions that give content to the notion of a maximally great entity, the argument consists of a single inference from a single premise to a conclusion. It is—we may suppose—knowable *a priori* that the inference is valid. The premise might be held to be knowable *a priori*; but—depending upon the purposes of the defender of the arguer—it might also be held to be knowable only *a posteriori*. Plantinga himself thinks that the argument can, at best, establish only that it can be reasonable for people to accept the conclusion of the argument—and, for that purpose, it seems clear that there is no reason to suppose that the premise is knowable *a priori*. But, if that’s right, then it seems that Plantinga’s argument doesn’t involve *a priori* movement from concept to belief—and so, at the very least, it is not obvious that Plantinga’s argument is even *prima facie* vulnerable to Kant’s criticisms.

Perhaps it might be objected that it is unfair to require that Kant’s criticisms should defeat Plantinga’s argument, at least given the purpose that Plantinga has for his argument. But we can ask the same questions about, say, Curley’s exposition of Descartes’ *Meditation V* argument. Is it true that this argument involves *a priori* movement from concept to belief?

It seems clear that Kant would be happy enough to concede the first and third premises to Descartes: Kant accepts that we do have an idea of God as a supremely perfect being, and—though this is perhaps more debatable—that we do have ideas of things that, whether or not they exist, and whether or not we think of them, have true and immutable natures or essences. Moreover, it seems that Kant can hardly deny that the conclusion follows from the premises: the conclusion of the argument certainly seems to be a logical consequence of the premises. Is it plausible to suggest that a proper target for Kant’s criticism may be found in either the second or the fourth premise? Kant himself seems to indicate that he is happy with the second premise: he allows that we know *a priori* that God is omnipotent. Generalising from this case, it seems that he will be happy to allow that whatever property is perceived clearly and distinctly as belonging to the true and immutable nature of something that we have an idea of really does belong to that thing. So it seems that Kant must object to the fourth premise, i.e. to the claim that we perceive clearly and distinctly that existence belongs to the true and immutable nature of a supremely perfect being.

Does justified acceptance of the premise that we perceive clearly and distinctly that existence belongs to the true and immutable nature of a supremely perfect being require *a priori* movement from concept to belief? Does justified acceptance of the premise that we perceive clearly and distinctly that existence belongs to the true and immutable nature of a supremely perfect being require acceptance of the claim that existence is a real predicate (i.e. acceptance of the claim that existence can be part of the concept of a thing)? I think that it is not straightforward to answer these questions. Moreover, even if we do think that this formulation of Descartes’ argument is at least

prima facie vulnerable to Kant's criticisms, it still remains to be determined whether Kant's criticisms constitute a weighty objection to the argument in question. Should we think, for example, that the only way in which it could be true that we perceive clearly and distinctly that existence belongs to the true and immutable nature of a supremely perfect being is if it were true that the concept of a supremely perfect being somehow contains existence? If we suppose—as perhaps Descartes himself would have allowed—that we can clearly and distinctly perceive that a property belongs to the true and immutable nature of a thing even though the property in question is no part of our concept of that thing, then it seems that we shall still be able to conclude that, in the end, Curley's formulation of Descartes' ontological argument is not damaged by the Kantian criticism.

Even if we are persuaded that Kant failed to show that ontological proof of the existence of God is impossible, it remains possible—for all that has been argued to this point—that there is some other way of showing that ontological proof of the existence of God is impossible. In particular, as we noted earlier, it might be that it is possible to mount a strong case for the claim that every possible ontological argument is vulnerable to Gaunilo-style critique.

Consider, for example, Plantinga's argument. Suppose that we identify some properties that make for excellence in islands—the I-properties. Suppose, further, that the I-max properties are the ideal—or maximal—versions of the I-properties. Then we can mount the following argument:

1. For any x, x is *maximally I-excellent* iff x possesses the I-max properties. (Definition)
2. For any x, x is *maximally I-great* iff x is necessarily existent and maximally I-excellent. (Definition)
3. It is possible that there is a maximally I-great entity. (Premise)
4. (Hence) There is a maximally I-excellent entity. (From 3.)

This argument seems as well-suited to the purposes of the opponent of Plantinga's ontological argument as Gaunilo's argument is to the purposes of the opponent of Anselm's argument. Moreover, one might suspect that it won't require much ingenuity to carry out the same trick for other ontological arguments. However, it is no easy matter to show that there *could not* be an ontological argument that is not vulnerable to this kind of objection. As things now stand, it is at least a highly controversial question whether Gödel's ontological argument is vulnerable to this kind of objection—and it seems that it must be an open question whether there are kinds of ontological arguments that we have not yet countenanced that are immune to Gaunilo-style critique.

In view of the preceding considerations, I am inclined to think that we do not now—and perhaps never will—have good *a priori* reasons for rejecting the claim that there are successful ontological arguments. However—for reasons that I have argued at length elsewhere—I also think that it is quite clear that no ontological argument that has hitherto been produced comes anywhere near success. In my view, when we look in detail at the premises and conclusions of those ontological arguments that have been produced to date, we do find either (a) that the conclusions are not adequately supported by the premises; or (b) the premises don't have the kind of status that is

possessed by premises is successful arguments; or (c) the conclusion of the argument is something that non-believers can accept with equanimity. But, of course, in order to decide whether I am right about this, there is no substitute for a detailed examination of all of the arguments in question.

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