

UNIT 3

ST. ANSELM'S ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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1. Introduction

St. Anselm's Ontological Argument has a special place not only in the philosophy of religion but in the history of human thought in general. Anyone who understands it has no choice but to be in awe of it and this includes all those who ultimately believe that the argument is flawed. The argument is remarkable for many reasons. One of them has to do with the fact that the argument is a priori – it does not rely on any a posteriori premises. The other has to do with the fact that it purports to show that the mere concept of God implies that God exists. In other words, if we have the concept of God, we must admit that God exists.

But this is an extraordinary claim in at least two ways. First, it is not true of other concepts. We have the concept of a winged horse but do not think that winged horses exist. We may develop all sorts of other concepts of things that do not actually exist (we can imagine and thus have a concept of: butterflies as big as an Airbus, giraffes as tall as Empire State Building, all-good mothers-in-law, etc.) but our developing concepts of those things will not make (or in another way be evidence that) those things exist – we have just concocted those concepts. St. Anselm claims that the concept of God is quite unique in this respect – having the concept of God implies that God exists. Second, if it is true that having the concept of God implies that God exists then atheism is not just a false position, it is incoherent or self-contradictory. For an atheist surely has the concept of God but yet she denies that God exists, which is something that she logically cannot do if St. Anselm is right.

Before I introduce the argument itself, you need to understand three preliminaries. I will then present to you the argument in various shorter and longer versions, and also the very simplest version, which I dub the “pizza version” of the argument. We will then look at some of the criticisms that the argument has been subjected to.

2. Three Preliminary Thoughts

2.1. Definition of God

We have already defined God as the omnipotent, omnibenevolent, omniscient being. St. Anselm uses a different, though certainly not incompatible, definition of God in his argument. He thinks of God as that being than which no greater can be conceived. More simply, according to St. Anselm, God is the greatest possible being – it is a being such that none greater is possible. Henceforth, I will use the phrase ‘the greatest possible being’ instead the more convoluted phrase ‘being than which no greater can be conceived’.

(D) God is the greatest possible being. (Definition)

It is important for us to recognize a certain implication of our understanding God as the greatest possible being. Consider the question: Is it possible to imagine a being greater than God? Could God be greater than He is? You must answer it in the negative – God is the greatest *possible*, the greatest *imaginable*, being, so:

God could not be greater than He is.

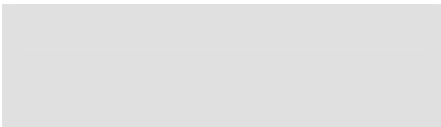
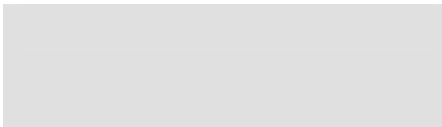
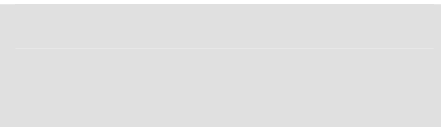
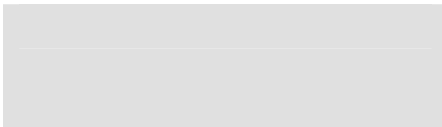
2.2. Exists in the Understanding vs. Exists in Reality

Here again you need to understand concepts that sound very difficult but are relatively straightforward.

To have **existence in the understanding** (or existence in the mind) is to have “mental existence,” i.e. to be thought or imagined or seen (in the mind) by somebody. You can imagine a fat butterfly, indeed so fat that its stomach would be dragging it down. Such butterflies do not exist (in reality) but, because we have just thought about them, they do exist in the understanding. Note that it is enough for a thing to exist in the mind of at least one person, for us to say that it exists in the understanding. So, if I, but not you, imagine a butterfly eating potato chips then it still exists in the understanding.

To **exist in reality** is to *really exist* in the external world. A word of caution is needed here. One might think that to exist in reality means to exist in the physical world but things are not so simple. After all, one might think that God does not exist in the physical world but outside of it, but that He still exists. Indeed, philosophers are known to have argued about the (real) existence of all kinds of objects. Some thought that numbers and ideal geometrical figures exist (Plato, for instance). Some thought that abstract objects exist. Some thought that abstract works of literature exist (e.g. there are very many copies of the film *Gone with the Wind*, but those philosophers insist there exists only one such film and they do not mean by this the original tape or whatever medium *the film* was recorded on). So ‘real’ existence in this setting means ‘actual and not just imagined’ existence.

Just to test out your understanding of the distinction, try to fill in the following table with some examples of objects:

		In the mind:	
		Exists	Does not exist
In reality:	Exists	1. Exists both in reality and in the understanding, e.g.: 	3. Exists only in reality, e.g.: 
	Does not exist	2. Exists only in the understanding, e.g.: 	4. Exists neither in reality nor in the understanding, e.g.: 

Exercise: Fill in the table, filling in the categories in order 1, 2, 3. Category 4 will present problems. Think about it, fill in the rest of the table and read on. To help with the task of filling the table, I include examples of objects that you should allot to the categories 1, 2 and 3:

chairs, Dr. P., I –  [fill in your name], Mickey Mouse, Christmas trees, Santa Claus, things that have not been discovered yet, USM.

Let's consider these things in turn.

- Chairs – chairs surely exist in reality and since we perceive them also in the understanding. They belong to Category 1.
- Dr.P. – (i.e. I), I exist both in reality and in the mind (since sometimes you are thinking about me, and I am thinking about me too, and a couple of other people as well). So, I belong to Category 1, as well. (If you thought that I should go into Category 2, i.e. existing only in the mind but not in reality, then you probably have too subjective an understanding of existence in reality. I'm really out here.)
- I [redacted] [fill in your name] (i.e. you ☺). You exist both in reality and in the mind (just like me), so you belong to Category 1.
- Mickey Mouse – here is finally someone belonging to a different category. Mickey Mouse is a fictional character – it exists in our minds, but does not exist in reality, so it belongs to Category 2. Note that if the question were about the *films about Mickey Mouse* then we would say that they exist both in reality and in the mind. But Mickey Mouse exists only in the mind.
- Christmas trees – straightforwardly belong into Category 1.
- Santa Claus – like Mickey Mouse exists in the mind but not in reality (I hate to be the first one to tell you this . . . ☺)
- Things that have not been discovered yet – this is interesting. If you ask me specifically what things, I can't tell you because they have not been discovered yet. But we have pretty good reasons for thinking that there are such things in reality, though they do not yet exist in the mind. So they belong to Category 3.
- USM – sometimes you wish it belonged to Category 2 ☺, but it belongs to Category 1.

If you made any mistakes, refill the table again.

		In the mind:	
		Exists	Does not exist
In reality:	Exists	1. Exists both in reality and in the mind, e.g.: [redacted]	3. Exists only in reality, e.g.: [redacted]
	Does not exist	2. Exists only in the mind, e.g.: [redacted]	4. Exists neither in reality nor in the mind, e.g.: [redacted]

What about Category 4? What exists neither in reality nor in the mind? Are there any such objects? Well, there is some controversy on this point, but some philosophers claim to have found such objects – they are *logically* impossible objects such as:

- married bachelors
- round squares
- the largest positive integer

You might wonder why one says that they do not exist in the mind, after all are we not “giving” them a mental existence by naming them? Well, things are not so easy. Consider numbers. There are lots of numbers that exist in the understanding. (Some Platonist philosophers of mathematics also think that they exist in reality.) For example, there are numbers such as: 2, 4 but also 444404004024554297134054705731250345715015190452854. And so on. Now, we can form the string of words ‘the largest positive integer’ but this string of words does not denote any number (because for any integer there is always one larger than it). This name (‘the largest positive integer’ is thus completely empty). There is not such a number not even in the mind. Likewise, consider a round square. Obviously, you cannot see a round square. And you cannot imagine a round square either. Nor can you form a concept of a round square, like you can form a concept of a round butterfly (perhaps its wings would be such as to make perfect circle when open). But with a round square, the matter is completely different. Here it is a part of the definition of a square that it is not round and part of the definition of something round that it is not square. There cannot be round squares and we cannot imagine or think about them in any way. Round squares do not exist in the mind (even though the name ‘round square’ exists both in the mind and in reality).

All of this might have been a bit confusing, so let’s just remind ourselves of the distinction between existence in the understanding (in the mind) and existence in reality in the simplest terms again. To have existence in the understanding is to have mental existence. Something exists in the understanding when we think about it, have a perception of it, imagine it or when it is otherwise in our minds. To have existence in reality is to have an external (outside-of-mind) existence. Little Calvin (from the *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon by Bill Watterson) does not exist in reality, but Bill Watterson as well as the cartoon itself does (in fact the author and the cartoon exist both in the mind and in reality).

Test

Consider the questions “Does God exist in the understanding? Does God exist in reality?” Will the theist and atheist differ in the answers they give to these questions?

See the Test Results on page **3-19** at the end of this unit *now*.

2.3. The Principle (G)

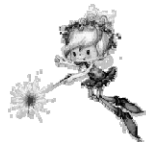
Now that you understand the distinction between what it is to exist in the mind and what it is to exist in reality, it is time for the last preliminary thought, which is crucial to your understanding of the ontological argument. St. Anselm accepts the following principle, which in a slogan might be put thus:

To exist in reality is greater than to exist only in the mind (but not in reality)

More precisely, we can put the thought in the form of “principle (G)”:

(G) A thing that exists in reality is greater than that same thing if it existed only in the mind (and not in reality).

St. Anselm does not state the principle explicitly in the excerpts you have read (or are going to read) but he clearly accepts it. What he means by this is also something intuitive: if you compare two objects that are identical in every other respect except that one exists in the mind only while the other exists also in reality then it seems clear that the one that exists in reality is greater than the one that exists only in the mind. Note that the comparison here involves objects identical in every other respect. The principle holds in situations such as depicted below:



A fairy that exists in reality

Principle (G) applies:

is greater than



A fairy that exists only in the mind



A donkey that exists in reality

Principle (G) applies:

is greater than



A donkey that exists only in the mind

But the principle will not offer any verdict when objects that differ in qualities are compared. So For example, in the following situation, the Principle (G) will simply not give us any verdict:



A donkey that exists in reality

Principle (G) does not apply:



A fairy that exists only in the mind

St. Anselm thinks that the Principle (G) is a truth of reason, i.e. that it is true *a priori*. Indeed, it does seem intuitive in most cases. It is important to understand the greatness involved as a kind of ontological or metaphysical greatness. Think for a second about the following comparisons:



Lord Voldemort
who exists in reality

Principle (G) applies:



Lord Voldemort
who exists only in the mind

In this case, likewise the verdict of the Principle (G) would be that Lord Voldemort would be greater if he existed in reality than if he existed only in the mind. Of course, St. Anselm does not mean to say that it would be “great for us,” he means metaphysical greatness. The real Voldemort would actually have the terrible powers Joanne Rowling has taught us to imagine.

Perhaps the single most important implication of Principle (G) is that the claim that if something exists only in the mind then it might have been greater than it in fact is. Take the example of the fairy. The fairy exists only in the mind. If she existed in reality then she would be greater than she in fact is. (All the things we imagine her to be able to do, she would in fact be able to do!) So, since the fairy exists only in the mind, it is true that she might have been greater than she is. Let us sum this up:

If something exists only in the mind then it might have been greater than it is.

2.4. Summary

You have now grasped the three preliminary thoughts that are essential to your grasping the ontological argument itself. Let us recoup:

- St. Anselm’s understanding (D) of God as the greatest possible being,
 - ↳ from which it follows that there could not be a being greater than God;
- St. Anselm’s distinction between existence in reality and existence in the mind;
- St. Anselm’s Principle (G) according to which something that exists in reality is greater than that same thing if it existed only in the mind,
 - ↳ from which it follows that if something exists only in the mind then it could have been greater than it is.

3. St. Anselm's Ontological Argument

We are now finally ready for the ontological argument itself. Before we break the argument down, let's consider it in prose.

3.1. The Ontological Argument in Prose

God is the greatest possible being. The atheist and the theist agree that God exists in the mind, but they differ as to whether God exists in reality. The atheist believes that God does not exist in reality. St. Anselm shows that this belief can be proven to be false because it leads to a contradiction. He argues thus:

Rendition 1:

Let's consider what would be the case if the atheist were right and God did not exist in reality. Since to exist in reality is greater than to exist only in the mind, this would mean that if God did not exist in reality then God could be greater than He is (He would be greater if he existed in reality). But since God is the greatest possible being, so God can not be greater than He is. So the atheist's belief that God does not exist in reality leads to the contradictory conclusion that God (the greatest possible being) can be greater than He is! We thus have to reject the atheist belief that God does not exist in reality since it leads to a contradiction. If so, then God must exist in reality.

Rendition 2:

God is the greatest possible being. It is greater to exist in reality than not to exist in reality (to exist in the mind only). If God did not exist in reality then it would be possible to imagine something that is greater than God (viz. a being just like God, i.e. omnibenevolent, omnipotent, which in addition existed in reality). But it is impossible to imagine anything that is greater than God because God is the greatest possible being. So, God does exist in reality.

Rendition 3:

St. Anselm thinks of God as the greatest possible being. If so, then it is impossible for there to be a greater being – God could not be greater than He is. The theist and the atheist both agree that God exists in the mind – they both have the concept of God. What they disagree about is whether God also exists in reality (as the theist claims) or only in the mind (as the atheist claims). St. Anselm thinks that, contrary to appearances, the atheist view is incoherent or self-contradictory (it leads straightforwardly to absurdity) and thus must be false. To see this more clearly, let us accept the atheist (or the fool's, in St. Anselm's medieval language) view, i.e. let us suppose that God does not exist in reality but only in the mind.

Remind yourself now of the principle that to exist in reality is greater than to exist only in the mind. This means that anything that exists only in the mind could be greater than it is (and it would be greater than it is if it existed in reality). The principle holds for everything, so since the atheist believes that God does not exist in reality but only in the mind, she must also believe that God could be greater than He is (he would be greater than He is, if He existed in reality). But this is an incoherent, self-contradictory belief because the atheist accepted that God is the

greatest possible being. So, to believe that God could be greater than He is, is to believe that the greatest possible being could be greater than it is, but this is impossible!

In this way, St. Anselm shows that the atheist supposition that God does not exist in reality leads to absurdity and thus must be rejected as false.

3.2. The Ontological Argument Schematized

Let's represent the argument in a schematized form:

1.	God is the greatest possible being	Definition (D)
2.	God could not be greater than He is	(1)
3.	God exists in the mind	(1)
4.	To exist in reality is greater than to exist in the mind only	Premise
5.	If some thing exists only in the mind then it could be greater than it is	(4)
6.1	Suppose: God does not exist in reality	Supposition(<i>reductio</i>)
6.2.	God exists only in the mind	(6.1), (3)
6.3.	God could be greater than He is	(6.2), (5)
6.4.	Contradiction!	(6.3), (2)
7.	God exists in reality	(rejection of 6.1 – it leads to absurdity)

This schematization presents the essential steps of the argument. We need to make sure that we understand how each step is justified.

Step 1. “God is the greatest possible being” – this is just St. Anselm’s definition of God (§2.1).

Step 2. “God could not be greater than He is” – this is a consequence of the definition: if God is the greatest possible being then God could not be greater than He already is.

Step 3. “God exists in the mind” – This is quite uncontroversial, especially in the context of the debate between the atheist and the theist, which is central here. Both the theist and the atheist believe that God exists in the mind. They differ as to whether God exists in reality. However, given the way that “existence in the mind” is understood, the mere fact that at least one of us can form the concept of God (as we do accepting Definition D) would suffice to establish that God exists in the mind.

Step 4. “To exist in reality is greater than to exist in the mind only” – this is the Principle (G), which is another premise in St. Anselm’s argument, one that St. Anselm believes is to be accepted a priori. As we have seen (§2.3), there are some intuitions that support the Principle.

Step 5. “If some thing exists only in the mind then it could be greater than it is” – this is a straightforward consequence of Principle (G). If to exist in reality is greater than to exist in the mind only then it follows that something that exists in the mind only could be greater than it is.

Steps 6.1-6.4 are the *reductio* steps (remind yourself about *reductio ad absurdum* proofs in Unit 2), which start with the *reductio* supposition (6.1) that God does not exist in reality, show that the supposition leads to a contradiction and thus conclude (7) that God exists in reality.

Step 6.1. “God does not exist in reality” – this is the supposition for the *reductio* proof. Note that it is the central belief of atheism. However, since this is not a premise in the argument, it is not meant to be accepted as true – it is accepted for the time being for the purposes of the argument (the theist can accept it for the time being for the purposes of the argument as well).

Step 6.2. “God exists only in the mind” – this is a straightforward consequence of two already accepted steps, viz. that God exists in the mind (3) and that God does not exist in reality (6.1). If so then, given St. Anselm’s distinction (§2.2), God exists in the mind only. (Note that this is a consequence within the *reductio* argument – it relies on the *reductio* supposition.)

Step 6.3. “God could be greater than He is” – this is now a straightforward application of the consequence (5) of Principle (G) and the claim we have just arrived at in step 6.2. If anything that exists only in the mind could be greater than it already is (5) then since – purportedly (6.2) – God exists only in the mind, then we have no choice but to conclude (within the *reductio* context) that God could be greater than He is.

Step 6.4. But this is absurd, for we have already seen that it is a consequence (2) of the definition of God that God could not be greater than He is. We thus arrive at a contradiction: God could be greater than He is (6.3) and God could not be greater than He is (2).

Step 7. “God exists in reality” – In view of the fact that the *reductio* supposition that God does not exist in reality leads to a contradiction, it has to be rejected and we have to conclude that God exists in reality.

[This is just a copy of the argument from previous page, so you can refer to the steps of the proof more easily]

1.	God is the greatest possible being	Definition (D)
2.	God could not be greater than He is	(1)
3.	God exists in the mind	(1)
4.	To exist in reality is greater than to exist in the mind only	Premise
5.	If some thing exists only in the mind then it could be greater than it is	(4)
6.1	Suppose: God does not exist in reality	Supposition(<i>reductio</i>)
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6.4.	Contradiction!	(6.3), (2)
7.	God exists in reality	(rejection of 6.1 – it leads to absurdity)

Let us use the classification of proofs we learned in Unit 2, to categorize St. Anselm’s ontological argument.

Is the argument thus put *a priori* or *a posteriori*? It will be *a priori* if all its premises are *a priori*, and *a posteriori* otherwise. Well, there are two premises in the argument in step 1 and in step 4. The definition of God is usually thought to be *a priori* and, as we said, St. Anselm’s certainly believed that the Principle (G) in step 4 is an *a priori* truth.

Is the argument epistemic or pragmatic? It is clearly epistemic – its conclusion is that God exists not that it is useful to believe that God exists.

Moreover, the argument (in the above schematization) has the structure of a *reductio ad absurdum* proof.

If you have understood the argument so far, you can skip §3.3, in which I give you one final simplified rendition of the argument, which I call the “pizza version” for reasons you are about to discover.

3.3. St. Anselm’s Ontological Argument: “Pizza Version”

St. Anselm’s argument ultimately relies on a simple inference that as long as we agree that a certain property is great-making then the greatest possible being must have this property.

Consider this inference on the example of a pizza.

Pizza step of the argument

1. Pick a pizza topping that would make the following two claims true. (Some candidates here include: pepperoni, cheese, mushrooms, anchois, etc.)

What makes a pizza great is _____.

A pizza with _____ is greater than a pizza without _____.

2. Imagine now the greatest pizza of all. Does the greatest pizza have the special topping that you picked out?

Does the greatest pizza of all have _____? Why?

[See “Pizza Version of the Argument” on page 3-19 now to make sure that you understand the argument thus far.]

The gist of the ontological argument

3. St. Anselm believed that existence in reality makes things greater than they would be otherwise, i.e. St. Anselm filled out the questionnaire thus:

A being that **exists in reality** is greater than a being that does not **exist in reality**.

4. Imagine the greatest possible being. Does the greatest possible being exist in reality. – Surely it must for the very same reason that the greatest possible pizza must have the great-making topping. If a being did not exist in reality it could not be the greatest possible being for no matter how great it would already be, it would be possible for it to be greater still – if it existed in reality.

If you have not understood the argument thus far, you should have understood it now. This is time to go back to the beginning of §3 and restudy the argument. You must be able to understand the schematized version to be able to do the quiz successfully.

3.4. Summary

Wow! – ought to be your reaction to St. Anselm’s ontological argument, whether you are a theist or an atheist. It will take time for you to appreciate how difficult it is to construct proofs. This is all looks simple and so might give the impression that it is trivial. Anyone could just jot down a couple of steps. But it is not. The argument is really ingenious – this is admitted even by those who think it ultimately either invalid or problematic.

If you are an atheist, do not feel threatened by the argument. If the argument works, this is a victory for the theist in the game of religious rationalism, which both the theist and the atheist entered. There are atheists who do feel threatened by – especially such powerful – arguments. But this just shows that the assumption of religious rationalism can be threatening both to the theist and to the atheist. It is really a courageous assumption. And there are fideists among atheists as well as theists.

4. Gaunilo’s Objection to St. Anselm’s Proof

The first objection that deserves mention is the objection made by a contemporary of St. Anselm, a monk known by the name of Gaunilo.

4.1. Gaunilo’s Worry

Gaunilo thought that there is really something “fishy” about the argument. As we stressed at the beginning, in the argument, we infer that something (God) exists in reality from the fact it exists in the mind. But this is usually an invalid inference pattern – just because we can make up something up in our minds (butterflies eating potato chips, dog ballerinas, nurturing mothers-in-law, etc.) does not mean that it exists in reality.

St. Anselm was, of course, aware of this general feature of his argument – it indeed purported to show that God exists in reality from the fact that He exists in the mind *and* – St. Anselm added – some other facts. St. Anselm argued that the concept of God is very special. It is because we conceive of God as the greatest possible being that the proof works. It would not work if we worked just with the assumption that God exists in the mind. From this assumption, it indeed does not follow that God exists in reality (as it does not follow for any other just imagined object).

4.2. Gaunilo’s Argument

But Gaunilo still thought that there is something not quite right about the argument, even after St. Anselm’s rejoinder. And though he could not pinpoint exactly which premise was wrong or at what point the argument was invalid (which step did not follow from the others), he tried to demonstrate that the argument is invalid by showing that the same argument form (now with similar assumptions) can be used to prove the existence of things that, as most of us believe, do not exist in reality.

Gaunilo demonstrated his counterproof for the greatest possible island, the Perfect Island, for short. I will just present the schematized version.

1.	The Perfect Island is the greatest possible island	Definition
2.	The Perfect Island could not be greater than it is	(1)
3.	The Perfect Island exists in the mind	(1)
4.	To exist in reality is greater than to exist in the mind only	Premise
5.	If some thing exists only in the mind then it could be greater than it is	(4)
6.1	Suppose: The Perfect Island does not exist in reality	Supposition(<i>reductio</i>)
6.2.	The Perfect Island exists only in the mind	(6.1), (3)
6.3.	The Perfect Island could be greater than it is	(6.2), (5)
6.4.	Contradiction!	(6.3), (2)
7.	The Perfect Island exists in reality	(rejection of 6.1 – it leads to absurdity)

The steps of this argument seem to be justified in just the same way as in St. Anselm’s argument. Let’s just consider the steps that change.

Step 1. “The Perfect Island is the greatest possible island” – this is just a definition, and we surely can accept a definition.

Step 2. “The Perfect Island could not be greater than it is.” – Just as in the original ontological argument we must accept the inference from the fact that the Perfect Island is the greatest possible island to the fact that the Perfect Island could not be greater than it is.

Step 3. “The Perfect Island exists in the mind” – the Perfect Island might not have existed in our minds prior to considering this argument, but it exists now because we have understood the definition of it.

The remaining steps will be justified in exactly the same way as in the original argument.

4.3. Objection to Gaunilo

Confronted with this argument, one might say, that the argument has not been shown to be invalid. To show the argument to be invalid we must use the same argument form (as we did here), start with true premises (as we did here) and arrive at a false conclusion. But the objector asks us to consider whether indeed the conclusion is clearly false. How do we know that the Perfect Island does not exist in reality? Perhaps we have not discovered it yet.

Indeed, the neo-Platonists¹ have argued that Gaunilo’s argument provides us with good reasons for believing that the Perfect Island exists!

¹ We have briefly discussed Plato in Unit 1. Plato believed that there objectively exist ideal objects. He was inspired by the objects that geometry considered and concluded that if the claims of geometry are true (and they seemed most certain of any claims) then there must be ideal triangles, ideal straight lines, ideal points, etc. And since those ideal objects do not exist in our physical world, they must exist in some other realm, to which philosophers since have applied the term ‘Platonic heaven’. Plato then argued that there must also be other ideal objects like ideal justice, ideal good, ideal love, etc.

4.4. Gaunilo's Reply to the Objection

Gaunilo, however, remained convinced that there is something wrong. The argument does not just apply to the Perfect Island but to any Perfect X which will be defined as the greatest possible X , where ' X ' can be substituted by a name of (possibly) any object.

Exercise "Gaunilo's Arguments"

Use the form of the ontological argument to prove that the Perfect Computer, the Perfect Horse, the Perfect Husband exist. (To help you with the task, I've provided the argument form for you, you should introduce appropriate changes and justify the steps. Try to do this not looking at the original argument.)

Prove that the Perfect Computer exists in reality

1. [] is the greatest possible []
2. [] could not be greater than it is
3. [] exists in the mind
4. To exist in reality is greater than to exist in the mind only
5. If some thing exists only in the mind then it could be greater than it is
 - 6.1 | Suppose: [] does not exist in reality
 - 6.2. | [] exists only in the mind
 - 6.3. | [] could be greater than it is
 - 6.4. | **Contradiction!**
7. [] exists in reality

Prove that the Perfect Horse exists in reality

1. [] is the greatest possible []
2. [] could not be greater than it is
3. [] exists in the mind
4. To exist in reality is greater than to exist in the mind only
5. If some thing exists only in the mind then it could be greater than it is
 - 6.1 | Suppose: [] does not exist in reality
 - 6.2. | [] exists only in the mind
 - 6.3. | [] could be greater than it is
 - 6.4. | **Contradiction!**
7. [] exists in reality

Prove that the Perfect Husband exists in reality

1. _____ is the greatest possible _____
2. _____ could not be greater than it is
3. _____ exists in the mind
4. To exist in reality is greater than to exist in the mind only
5. If some thing exists only in the mind then it could be greater than it is
- 6.1 | Suppose: _____ does not exist in reality
- 6.2. | _____ exists only in the mind
- 6.3. | _____ could be greater than it is
- 6.4. | **Contradiction!**
7. _____ exists in reality

By popular demand one more task: *Prove that the Perfect Wife exists in reality*

1. _____ is the greatest possible _____
2. _____ could not be greater than it is
3. _____ exists in the mind
4. To exist in reality is greater than to exist in the mind only
5. If some thing exists only in the mind then it could be greater than it is
- 6.1 | Suppose: _____ does not exist in reality
- 6.2. | _____ exists only in the mind
- 6.3. | _____ could be greater than it is
- 6.4. | **Contradiction!**
7. _____ exists in reality

[You can check that your answers are correct, in a separate file, available on-line]

If you have completed the above exercise, you might come to share Gaunilo's suspicion that, though we do not yet know what, something is wrong with the argument. The same argument form can be applied to just too many things.

Moreover, in most cases we clearly believe that those things do not exist in reality. Does a Perfect Computer exist in reality? Clearly not. Most newlyweds believe their newlywed husband/wife is perfect but they are in for a surprise (as the more experienced keep telling them). We can thus use the argument form to form a false conclusion from true premises, which is just a clear sign that the argument form is invalid. If so then St. Anselm's argument is invalid too.

4.5. A Word about the Dialectic

Now, you should not think now that if St. Anselm's argument that God exists fails then this must mean that God does not exist. Nothing like that follows. The failure to prove that God exists is just a failure to prove that God exists, nothing else. There are lots of things that do exist and we cannot prove that they exist by logical means: you cannot prove that your dinner existed last night by logical means. There are also some theorems in mathematics, which most mathematicians accept as true but which have not yet been proven – one of the most famous cases (until some years ago when it was finally proven) was Fermat's Last Theorem, which escaped being proven for almost three centuries.

On the other hand, the success in proving that God exists, would mean that God exists.

And of course, the same holds for proofs that God does not exist (we will consider such a proof in the next unit). If a proof for the atheist conclusion that God does not exist is successful then God does not exist, but if such a proof fails this does not mean that God exists, only that the proof has failed.

4.6. Summary and a Historical Reflection

Gaunilo argued that St. Anselm's ontological argument is invalid. He did not claim that any of the premises were false. Nor was he able to find out which steps exactly did not follow from the previous steps. He showed, however, that the argument form St. Anselm used to prove the existence of God can be used to prove the existence of clearly non-existent things.

Think for a moment about what you have just been witness to. Gaunilo lived in the 11th century, as did St. Anselm. Unlike St. Anselm, who was quite prominent in the Church structures (he was the archbishop of Canterbury), Gaunilo was a "lowly" Benedictine monk in the abbey of Marmoutier and close to nothing is known about him. The fact that Gaunilo *dares* to raise his voice shows something really amazing, his deep commitment to religious rationalism. For think for a second about what St. Anselm was doing. St. Anselm was trying to *prove* that God exists. And, of course, neither St. Anselm nor Gaunilo doubted for a second that God indeed does exist. That was just a given, they both had deep faith. But they were also both deeply committed to religious rationalism. Imagine just an ordinary religious person, or indeed even a monk, who hears that a prominent theologian (St. Anselm was the abbot of Bec at the time he published his proof) has just *proven logically* that God exists. One would think that such a person would think to himself "This is wonderful! Now we finally have a real proof what we already knew in our hearts." But this is not what Gaunilo did. Gaunilo studied the argument. He found the courage to find it problematic. (Think about the person involved here. Your deepest and most profound belief that is fundamental to your very existence – he was a monk! – acquires rational justification in what seems like an air-tight proof, and yet you have the courage to think that the proof is faulty, that it does not work.) He finally found the courage to speak up. He had the courage to speak up against a famous and powerful abbot!

We can only be in awe of his intellectual integrity and a truly deep commitment to religious rationalism.

5. Other Objections to St. Anselm's Proof

5.1. Existence Is Not a Predicate

One of the most famous objections to the ontological argument was put forward by the 18th century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, whose ethical theory we will discuss in a later unit. In brief, Kant argued that unlike “normal” properties such as being wise, being powerful, being beautiful, being friendly, and so on, existence is not a property. As such, it cannot be a “great-making” property either. If so, then we cannot accept Principle (G). (And Kant would also have problems in accepting any of the steps that include the word ‘exists’ in it. He would think that they need to be reformulated to uncover their real content.)

We have been talking about properties, but Kant said something about predicates. Well, predicates are just names of properties, so the predicate ‘wise’ is the name of the property of being wise, and ‘beautiful’ is the name of the property of being beautiful. So Kant’s point can also be presented thus. The predicates ‘wise’, ‘powerful’, ‘beautiful’, ‘friendly’ are genuine predicates but ‘exists’ is not a genuine predicate. The Principle (G) cannot even be formulated.

Now, Kant’s point is a very famous objection and a very deep objection, but it speaks really only to someone who has a very deep appreciation of contemporary logic, which treats what seems like a predicate (i.e. a name of property) ‘exists’ not as a predicate but as a logical operator, called the existential quantifier. Since most of you have not had logic before taking this class, I will refrain from addressing this objection any further, since you are bound not to understand it fully.

I should add, however, that there really is a discussion of this point. Indeed the objection that Rowe makes in his article (in the sections that I did not assign, i.e. “A Final Critique” and following) can be seen as a development of this insight of Kant’s.

5.2. The Principle (G) Reconsidered

Other objections have been raised against the premises in the argument. The one that attracts most attention is the Principle (G), which St. Anselm believed that we should accept *a priori*. It just stands to reason, he thought, that to exist in reality is greater than to exist only in the mind. But does it?

Kantian Objection. One of the objections to Principle (G) derives from the Kantian line of thought. The implication of Kant’s objection is that the greatness of a being is determined by “real” properties that it has, not by whether it exists or not.

Platonist Objection. Another objection might put from a Platonist line of thought. For a Platonist, objects that exist in what we call “the real world” are imperfect, mere reflections of their perfect ideal counterparts, which exist in the Platonic heaven, and which we can only grasp with our minds. So, for a Platonist the Principle (G) might not be acceptable.

This objection is not quite fair, however, since Plato distinguishes three kinds of existence while St. Anselm distinguishes two kinds of existence and it is not immediately clear how the Principle (G) would be stated in Plato’s tripartite division. Plato distinguishes between the existence of (1) Ideal Objects (Platonic Forms, or Platonic Ideas), (2) our mental concepts, by means of which

we grasp the Ideal Objects, but our mental concepts may not be as perfect – our mental idea of a triangle may be tainted by some subjective components, which may distort the Ideal Triangle, (3) the physical objects, which are poor and imperfect reflections of the Ideal Objects (all the actual triangular things in our physical world only very vaguely approximate the Ideal Triangle). Plato would certainly accept the following principles:

- To exist as an Ideal Object (1) is greater than to exist mentally (2).
- To exist mentally (2) is greater than to exist physically (3).

Now, there are two options. Either St. Anselm’s existence in reality is the same as Plato physical existence (3) or, more likely, St. Anselm’s existence in reality is a combination of Plato’s existence as an Ideal Object (1) and physical existence (3). If St. Anselm’s existence in reality is the same as Plato’s physical existence then the Principle (G) will be straightforwardly rejected – in fact quite the reverse is propounded by Plato – mental existence is greater than physical existence because it is (or at least can be) closer to the Ideal Objects. If St. Anselm’s existence in reality is a combination of existence as an Ideal Object and physical existence in Plato’s terms, then the Principle (G) is certainly not to be accepted as it stands, though it might be possible to reformulate in such a way as to preserve St. Anselm’s insight. I leave this, not easy, task to you.

Challenging the Status of Principle (G). St. Anselm thought that existence in reality is quite obviously greater than existence in the mind only. But if you think about it a little, the matter is not really so obvious. For one, it is not obviously true that our intuitions here are quite reliable. It is not clear, for example, that we can draw such comparisons freely between the categories distinguished by St. Anselm. Consider the following:

- (G) To exist in reality is greater than / less great than to exist in the mind only (but not in reality).
- (H) To exist in the mind is greater than / less great than to exist in reality only (but not in the mind).

Do we have as ready a verdict for (H) as we seem to have for (G)?

For another, one may object that the notion of greatness that the principle (G) relies on is tailor-made to suit the argument. For if we just confront our intuitions then we seem to accept Principle (G) for good things but reject it (and accept the contrary) for bad things. Recall what might have been your first reaction to the question how the Principle applies to Lord Voldemort. I’ve told you that St. Anselm means something else by ‘great’, something like “metaphysical greatness” but, the objector might argue, this is just what makes the premise tailor-made to lead to the conclusion that it is designed to lead to. Then again, one might disagree and think that there is a genuine room for such a concept of metaphysical greatness. There clearly is room for debate here.



Do you believe that St. Anselm was correct in thinking that the Principle (G) is *a priori*? Why (not)?

5.3. Epilogue

These and other objections have been proposed to St. Anselm's ontological argument. If you think, however, that they have been fatal to the argument, you will be wrong. There have been lots of sympathizers to the argument, who have been proposing ever new versions of it. Indeed, in the context of rational discourse, criticism is always a good thing. When an argument is challenged, you can improve it and work to perfect it.

The debate on the ontological argument is certainly not dead even today. Among contemporary philosophers, theologians and logicians, there still are some who try to revive it (using ever more complex logical machinery) and others who try to show that it is essentially misguided. If you are interested in these matters, I suggest at least two sources. First, a paper by one of the greatest 20th century analytic philosophers David Lewis ("Anselm and Actuality," *Nous* 4 (1970): 175-88), in which Lewis argues that the proper symbolization of the St. Anselm's argument requires recourse to modal logic, in which, however, the argument turns out to be invalid. Second, a book by Alvin Plantinga (*The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), in which Plantinga uses the tools of modal logic to propose a new version of the ontological argument.

You might also look up the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy on-line for an article on the subject.

Test Results

Does God exist in the understanding? Does God exist in reality? Will the theist and atheist differ in their answers?

Both the theist and the atheist will agree that God exists in the understanding. This is because both the theist and the atheist can have the concept of God.

The theist and the atheist will differ as to their answer to the second question. The theist will claim that God exists in reality (He is not just a figment of our imagination). The atheist will claim that God does not exist in reality (He is just a figment of our imagination).

Pizza Version of the Argument

1. Pick a pizza topping that would make the following two claims true. (Most students pick cheese, and I'll assume that's what you picked, in which your two claims follow:) What makes a pizza great is cheese. A pizza with cheese is greater than a pizza without cheese.

2. Imagine now the greatest possible pizza. Does the greatest possible pizza have cheese? Why? Well, surely the greatest possible pizza must have cheese. It is easy to see why – if that pizza did not have cheese it would not be the greatest possible pizza, for no matter how great the pizza already was, there could be one that is greater, viz. one that had cheese.

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