

Anselm

Proslogion II-V; *An Appendix, In Behalf of the Fool*, by Gaunilo 6, III¹

PHIL101

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Section III: How do I know?

Reading III.1

St. Anselm maintained that it is possible to demonstrate (prove) God's existence.² The principal logical work of the argument is carried out in terms of a distinction between an idea (i.e., that which "exists in the understanding") and any instance of that idea (i.e., that which "exists in reality"). Many ideas, of course, have instances: e.g., the concept of *a house* has many instances. These instances compose what we otherwise call 'reality.'

Ordinarily, we think, there is no strict relationship between an idea and its instances. That is, ordinarily, it is a contingent matter whether an idea has any instances. The idea of *a house*, for example, now has instances, but it has not always had instances. The idea of *a unicorn* has no instances, but that is not to say that it couldn't have.

Anselm thinks that in the idea of God he has discovered a special case. In this case, there is a necessary relationship between the idea and its instance, Anselm thinks, such that the idea cannot fail to have an instance. I.e., God must exist; the idea must be instantiated.

Anselm's argument for the existence of God begins with a fool.

Truly there is a God, although the fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.

It will be significant that it is the *fool* who thinks to himself that there is no God, as we shall presently see. For the moment, notice simply that Anselm is establishing that even a fool has some understanding of the concept of God. This concept of God Anselm states in the following:

AND so, Lord, do thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as thou knowest it to be profitable, to understand that thou art as we believe; and that thou art that which we believe. And indeed, we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.

¹ St. Anselm. *Proslogium; Monologium: An Appendix, In Behalf of the Fool, by Gaunilo; and Cur Deus Homo*. Sidney Norton Deane, trans. Chicago: Open Court, 1903.

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² Note, however, that he does not make this a condition of faith; faith is required of humans, he thinks. Our capacity to give rational proof of the existence of the object of our faith is simply a measure of the further glory of God's most interesting creation, humanity.

In this passage we find first Anselm's assertion that alongside faith is it proper for humans to know of God's existence. Then Anselm provides a compact expression of an important aspect of God's nature, as ordinarily understood:³ God is a being "than which nothing greater can be conceived." This expression is a bit of a mouthful. What does it mean, exactly? Presumably, it means that whatever else we might say about it, the idea of God is the idea of something *great*, of *ultimate greatness*, such that we can't conceive of anything *greater*. Anselm doesn't explain just what he means by 'greatness', but greatness is certainly a term commonly associated with God. 'Greatness' is perhaps best thought of as a *measure* or *magnitude* of something. In the case of God, presumably we are talking about great power, "mightiness", that is, and perhaps great love, as well. The point is that God's grandeur exceeds anything else that we might think of. We can think of nothing greater. For Anselm, then, God is *that than which nothing greater can be conceived*.

Now, the question that Anselm is pursuing is the question whether God can be known to exist. And so, having given some expression to God's nature, Anselm ponders this question:

Or is there no such nature, since the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God? ([Psalms 14:1](#)). But, at any rate, this very fool, when he hears of this being of which I speak – a being than which nothing greater can be conceived – understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding; although he does not understand it to exist.

Here, having raised the question of God's existence, Anselm makes a point of the fact that even a fool can understand the idea of God as that than which nothing greater can be conceived. His intent in doing so is to lay the groundwork for his proof of God's existence. That groundwork consists in the plain understanding of a seemingly straightforward idea, the idea of *that than which nothing greater can be conceived*. The fool has this idea, but thinks that nothing corresponds to it – i.e., he thinks that God doesn't exist, for, after all, he is a fool. This gives us a distinction between having the idea of something and understanding that thing to exist.

For, it is one thing for an object to be in the understanding, and another to understand that the object exists. When a painter first conceives of what he will afterwards perform, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand it to be, because he has not yet performed it. But after he has made the painting, he both has it in his understanding, and he understands that it exists, because he has made it.

Anselm is now ready to state his argument in full. The argument turns on the difference between the idea of something understood to exist "only in the understanding" and the idea of that same thing understood also to "exist in reality." An un-executed painting may exist "only in the understanding:" the painter has the idea, but has yet to produce it on canvas. Having then produced the painting, the painter's original idea now exists "in reality" as well. In Anselm's case, the idea in question is the idea of *that than which nothing greater can be conceived*, and the question is whether that idea can exist "only in the understanding" and not also "in reality."

Hence, even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For, when he hears of this, he understands it. And whatever is understood, exists in the understanding. And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be

³ That is, the primary religious traditions of the West, encompassing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, tend toward a depiction of God as all-power, all-knowing, and supremely benevolent. In this context, the notion that there might be something "greater" than God would seem absurd, implying a failure to understand the concept in the first place.

Anselm on God's Existence

conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality, which is greater.

Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.

Anselm concludes that God, *that than which nothing greater can be conceived*, exists both in the understanding and in reality. That is, we both understand the idea and the idea must have an instance – God exists. How exactly does he reach this conclusion? A key move is this sentence:

For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality, which is greater.

“... which is greater.” What is Anselm saying, here? *What*, exactly, is greater than *what*? Anselm suggests that there's an important difference between thinking of a thing *as existing* and thinking of it as *not existing*. It seems clear that *existing* is greater than *not existing*. An existing thing has more power than a non-existing thing, to say the least. Consider, then, the idea of God as not existing. To think to oneself, *God does not exist*, is to think of God in a condition *than which a greater* condition could be conceived – namely, as in the condition of existence. This implies that the idea of God as a being existing only in the understanding – i.e., the fool's idea of God's not existing – is *not* the idea of something than which no greater could be conceived. For we have only to think of that being, God, as existing to think of something greater. And so:

Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived.

But, as Anselm points out, “obviously, this is impossible.” That is, it is impossible for there to be an idea of something greater than the idea of that than which nothing greater can be conceived. The idea of that than which nothing greater can be conceived is precisely that idea with respect to which the idea of something greater doesn't exist! And so, it would seem, God must exist.

Anselm provides some further illumination to his argument, turning its various elements this way and that so as to reveal, as clearly as possible, his thinking. One aspect of this thinking is the suggestion that the idea of God is the idea of the sort of thing that cannot be conceived not to exist. In the end, he returns to the fool's mind, with the question how the fool can imagine God not to exist.

God cannot be conceived not to exist. – God is that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. – That which can be conceived not to exist is not God.

AND it assuredly exists so truly, that it cannot be conceived not to exist. For, it is possible to conceive of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist; and this is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, can be conceived not to exist, it is not that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this is an irreconcilable contradiction. There is, then, so truly a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist; and this being thou art, O Lord, our God.

So truly, therefore, dost thou exist, O Lord, my God, that thou canst not be conceived not to exist; and rightly. For, if a mind could conceive of a being better than thee, the creature would rise above the Creator; and this is most absurd. And, indeed, whatever else there is, except thee alone, can be conceived not to exist. To thee alone, therefore, it belongs to exist more truly than all other beings, and hence in a higher degree than all others. For, whatever else exists does not exist so truly, and hence in a

Anselm on God's Existence

less degree it belongs to it to exist. Why, then, has the fool said in his heart, there is no God (Psalms xiv. 1), since it is so evident, to a rational mind, that thou dost exist in the highest degree of all? Why, except that he is dull and a fool?

Anselm takes the last laugh, here, pointing out that the fool thinks he can conceive God not to exist only because he is too dull to perceive that the logic of the idea of God won't permit such a thought.

Anselm's argument is a version of what is called an *ontological argument* for God's existence. Ontological arguments for God's existence form a class of *a priori* arguments – i.e., arguments that make appeal only to logical principles and not to sense information.⁴ In the case of Anselm's argument, we have an argument appealing only to the content of the idea of God. Anselm is perhaps the first to have proposed such an argument, though others have done so since his time.

Needless to say, Anselm's argument has not gone unchallenged. Among the objections raised against it is one attributed to one Gaunilon, a monk of the Abbey Marmoutiers, in Tours, France. Little else is known of this monk, but as a contemporary of Anselm, his commentary was afforded a direct response from Anselm. Gaunilon makes a number of objections to Anselm's argument. His most famous takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*, that is, an argument intended to show that Anselm's position has absurd results, and so must not itself be correct. Note, in the following, the parallel that Gaunilon attempts to establish between Anselm's form of reasoning and his own.

It is said that somewhere in the ocean is an island, which, because of the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of discovering what does not exist, is called the lost island. And they say that this island has an inestimable wealth of all manner of riches and delicacies in greater abundance than is told of the Islands of the Blest; and that having no owner or inhabitant, it is more excellent than all other countries, which are inhabited by mankind, in the abundance with which it is stored. Now if some one should tell me that there is such an island, I should easily understand his words, in which there is no difficulty. But suppose that he went on to say, as if by a logical inference: "You can no longer doubt that this island which is more excellent than all lands exists somewhere, since you have no doubt that it is in your understanding. And since it is more excellent not to be in the understanding alone, but to exist both in the understanding and in reality, for this reason it must exist. For if it does not exist, any land which really exists will be more excellent than it; and so the island already understood by you to be more excellent will not be more excellent." If a man should try to prove to me by such reasoning that this island truly exists, and that its existence should no longer be doubted, either I should believe that he was jesting, or I know not which I ought to regard as the greater fool: myself, supposing that I should allow this proof; or him, if he should suppose that he had established with any certainty the existence of this island. For he ought to show first that the hypothetical excellence of this island exists as a real and indubitable fact, and in no wise as any unreal object, or one whose existence is uncertain, in my understanding.

Gaunilon seeks to show that Anselm's reasoning must be flawed, because that form of reasoning can be used to demonstrate the existence of things that we know not to exist. There is no "Lost Island," but if we suppose the idea of such an island to be the idea of *that island than which none more excellent can be conceived*, then by Anselm's reasoning, it would seem that the island must exist. Note, too, Gaunilon's play with the idea of a "lost island:" the idea of an island being "lost" is silly, as is, by extension, Anselm's reasoning. In any case, you should reflect on Gaunilon's reasoning and consider whether you find it effective.

Anselm himself did not. Here is his response:

⁴ In our next lesson, we will consider a class of argument that appeals directly to sense experience, what are called *cosmological* arguments.

But, you say, it is as if one should suppose an island in the ocean, which surpasses all lands in its fertility, and which, because of the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of discovering what does not exist, is called a lost island; and should say that there can be no doubt that this island truly exists in reality, for this reason, that one who hears it described easily understands what he hears. Now I promise confidently that if any man shall devise anything existing either in reality or in concept alone (except that than which, a greater cannot be conceived) to which he can adapt the sequence of my reasoning, I will discover that thing, and will give him his lost island, not to be lost again. But it now appears that this being than which a greater is inconceivable cannot be conceived not to be, because it exists on so assured a ground of truth; for otherwise it would not exist at all. Hence, if any one says that he conceives this being not to exist, I say that at the time when he conceives of this either he conceives of a being than-which a greater is inconceivable, or he does not conceive at all. If he does not conceive, he does not conceive of the non-existence of that of which he does not conceive. But if he does conceive, he certainly conceives of a being which cannot be even conceived not to exist. For if it could be conceived not to exist, it could be conceived to have a beginning and an end. But this is impossible. He, then, who conceives of this being conceives of a being which cannot be even conceived not to exist; but he who conceives of this being does not conceive that it does not exist; else he conceives what is inconceivable. The non-existence, then, of that than which a greater cannot be conceived is inconceivable.

Anselm, too, is having some fun at his opponent's expense. His response, in any case, seems to be to maintain that if his line of argument were transferable to other kinds of thing – besides, that is, the idea of God – then it would, after all, remain valid. His objection, then, would appear to be that his argument is not so-transferable. Is there a difference between the two arguments, Gaunilon's and Anselm's that would justify Anselm's response?

Ask Yourself

1. What is the meaning of the expression, *than which nothing greater can be conceived*? Can you explain it to yourself (or to another person)?
2. Why does Anselm think that it's impossible that the idea of God (as that than which nothing greater can be conceived) should be conceived to exist "only in the understanding" and not "in reality"? Can you explain this reasoning?
3. What is your opinion of Gaunilon's counter-argument? Could Anselm's reasoning be used to prove the existence of, say, a lot of money in your bank account?
4. In your judgment, does Anselm's argument make belief in God epistemically rational?