Anselm’s Ontological Argument
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1. For all objects x, if x exists only in the understanding and x might have existed in reality, then x might have been greater than x is.

- **Anselm**: “[S]uppose [a thing] exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater.”
- **Comment 1**: This “great-making principle” is not limited to God. But Anselm goes on to apply it to God.
- **Comment 2**: The greatness in question is *metaphysical*, not moral or aesthetic. Thus, a real Adolf Hitler, despite his iniquity, would be a greater thing (metaphysically speaking) than a merely imaginary Adolf Hitler.

Therefore,

2. If God exists only in the understanding and God might have existed in reality, then God might have been greater than God is (from 1, universal instantiation).

3. God exists only in the understanding.

- **Comment 1**: Anselm doesn’t *believe* this proposition; he *assumes* it for the sake of argument—to see where it leads, logically. He thinks it leads to an absurdity.
- **Comment 2**: To say that God exists only in the understanding is to say two things: (a) that God *exists* in the understanding; and (b) that God exists *in no other way or sense*. According to Anselm, “even the fool [of the Psalms] is convinced that something exists in the understanding . . . than which nothing greater can be conceived.”

4. God might have existed in reality.

- **Comment 1**: This does not imply that God *doesn’t* exist in reality, which is what Anselm goes on to deny!
- **Comment 2**: All Anselm means by this premise is that God is a *possible* object, unlike, say, a married bachelor, which is an *impossible* object. It’s false that a married bachelor might have existed in reality, but true (Anselm asserts) that God (understood as in premise 8) might have existed in reality.
Therefore,

5. God exists only in the understanding and God might have existed in reality (from 3 and 4, conjunction).

Therefore,

6. God might have been greater than God is (from 2 and 5, modus ponens).

Therefore,

7. God is an object than which a greater object is possible (from 6, paraphrase).

• **Comment:** This is another way of saying that God is not the supreme being.

8. God is (by definition) the object than which no greater object is possible.

• **Anselm:** “[W]e believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived”; “God is that than which a greater cannot be conceived.”

• **Comment 1:** This is how Anselm conceives of God—as the supreme being or greatest possible object. The premise purports to give content to the word “God”; that is, it states the conception of God with which we’re working. It seems to be a stipulative definition, which is fine; *but:*

• **Comment 2:** Aquinas—of all people!—questions the premise. He writes: “Perhaps not everyone who hears this word ‘God’ understands it to signify something than which nothing greater can be thought, seeing that some have believed God to be a body” (*Summa Theologiae*, First Part, Question II [“The Existence of God”], Article 1 [“Whether the Existence of God Is Self-Evident?”], Reply to Objection 2).

• **Comment 3:** Aquinas goes further: He says that even if “everyone understands that by this word ‘God’ is signified something than which nothing greater can be thought, nevertheless, it does not therefore follow that he understands that what the word signifies exists actually, but only that it exists in the intellect” (ibid). In other words, premise 8 means either (a) “God” refers to the object than which no greater is possible, which, because it assumes a referent, begs the question, or (b) “God” means the object than which no greater is possible, which solves the first problem but fails to generate the self-contradiction in 9. This is Gottlob Frege’s distinction be-
between reference and sense, or what contemporary philosophers of language call extension (denotation) and intension (connotation).

Therefore,

9. The object than which no greater object is possible is an object than which a greater object is possible (from 7 and 8).

  - **Anselm:** “[T]he very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible.”
  
  - **Comment:** Another way to state proposition 9 is that the supreme being is not the supreme being, which is patently (i.e., explicitly) self-contradictory.

Since the grand conclusion of the argument (proposition 9) is absurd or self-contradictory (hence false), either the argument is invalid or at least one of its premises (1, 3, 4, or 8) is false. Anselm concludes that premise 3 is false, from which he infers that God exists in reality as well as in the understanding. In other words, God is real. As he puts it, “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.”