

Anselm's Ontological Argument
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26 September 2006

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: This “great-making principle” is not limited to God. But Anselm goes on to apply it to God. The greatness in question is *metaphysical*, not moral or aesthetic. Thus, a real Hitler, despite his iniquity, would be a greater thing (metaphysically speaking) than a merely imaginary 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; he *assumes* it for the sake of argument—to see where it leads, logically.

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” 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 should not be read as a tensed proposition. Nor does it imply that God *doesn't* exist in reality, which is what Anselm goes on to deny!

Comment 2: All Anselm means by this is that God is a *possible* object, unlike, say, a married bachelor. It's false that a married bachelor might have existed in reality, but true (he 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 is possible (from 6).

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

8. God is the object than which no greater 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 Theologica* [ST], 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 Frege’s distinction between reference and sense, or what modern philosophers of language call extension (denotation) and intension (connotation).

Therefore,

9. The object than which no greater is possible is an object than which a greater 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 the conclusion 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 (9) is absurd or self-contradictory (and 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.”