

Gaunilo's Criticism of Anselm's Ontological Argument
Keith Burgess-Jackson
2 October 2006

Here, translated from the original Latin by M. J. Charlesworth, is what Anselm wrote in chapter 2 of *Proslogion*, entitled "That God Truly Exists":

Well then, Lord, You who give understanding to faith, grant me that I may understand, as much as You see fit, that You exist as we believe You to exist, and that You are what we believe You to be. Now we believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought. Or can it be that a thing of such a nature does not exist, since 'the Fool has said in his heart, there is no God' [Ps. 13:1; 52:1]? But surely, when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about, namely, 'something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought,' he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists. For it is one thing for an object to exist in the mind, and another thing to understand that an object actually exists. Thus, when a painter plans beforehand what he is going to execute, he has [the picture] in his mind, but he does not yet think that it actually exists because he has not yet executed it. However, when he has actually painted it, then he both has it in his mind and understands that it exists because he has now made it. Even the Fool, then, is forced to agree that something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in the mind. And surely that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-*cannot*-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-*can*-be-thought. But this is obviously impossible. Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that

something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality.¹

The so-called “ontological” argument (it was given that name by Immanuel Kant) is contained in (expressed by) the following passage:

Even the Fool, then, is forced to agree that something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in the mind. And surely that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-*cannot*-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-*can*-be-thought. But this is obviously impossible. Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality.

Anselm’s strategy is to assume, *for the sake of argument*, that God—understood as “that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought”—exists only in the mind. If he can conjoin this assumption with unquestionably true premises and deduce a self-contradiction (an “absurdity”), then he will have shown that the assumption is false; and if it’s false that God exists only in the mind, then God exists in reality *as well as* in the mind, for those, by hypothesis, are the only two types of existence. Here is my reconstruction of Anselm’s argument (sticking as closely as I can to the text):

1. If God exists only in the mind, then God is not the greatest conceivable thing.
2. God exists only in the mind.

Therefore,

¹Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 87-8 (italics and brackets in original).

3. God is not the greatest conceivable thing (from 1 and 2, modus ponens).

4. God is the greatest conceivable thing (by definition).

Therefore,

5. The greatest conceivable thing is not the greatest conceivable thing (from 3 and 4, substitution).

Proposition 5 is a self-contradiction, which means that if both of the inferences (from 1 and 2 to 3 and from 3 and 4 to 5) are valid, then at least one of the three premises—1, 2, or 4—is false. Anselm thinks the false premise is 2, from which he infers that God exists in reality as well as in the mind.

Gaunilo, a contemporary of Anselm and a fellow monk, thought that Anselm's reasoning could be used to prove the existence of objects, such as the greatest conceivable island, that we know do not exist.² If this is so, then we can infer that Anselm's argument is unsound (although we won't know exactly why). To see whether Gaunilo is correct, let us substitute "Lost Island" for "God" throughout the argument. "God," to Anselm, means "that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought," or, for short, the greatest conceivable thing. "Lost Island," to Gaunilo, means "the greatest conceivable island." Here is the result of the substitution:

1. If Lost Island exists only in the mind, then Lost Island is not the greatest conceivable thing.

2. Lost Island exists only in the mind.

Therefore,

3. Lost Island is not the greatest conceivable thing (from 1 and 2, modus ponens).

²See Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, *Pro Insipiente* (On Behalf of the Fool), *ibid.*, 105-10.

4. Lost Island is the greatest conceivable island (by definition).

Therefore,

5. The greatest conceivable island is not the greatest conceivable thing (from 3 and 4, substitution).

As you can see, the reasoning does *not* culminate, as Gaunilo thought, in a self-contradiction. Not only is proposition 5 not self-contradictory (i.e., necessarily false); it may not be *false!* Thus, one cannot infer, as Anselm did in the case of God, that premise 2 is false. In other words, one is not *driven* to infer that Lost Island exists in reality. Anselm's reasoning appears to work with just one object: the greatest conceivable *thing*.³ It does not work with the greatest conceivable island, the greatest conceivable \$1,000 bill, the greatest conceivable hockey player, or anything else. God is *sui generis* (in a class by God's self). It seems to me, therefore, that Gaunilo's criticism of the argument fails. This does not mean that the ontological argument succeeds, of course. There may be another criticism to which it succumbs.

³Anselm made this point himself. See his *Reply to Gaunilo*, *ibid.*, 111-22.