

From:

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PART 6: Philosophy of Religion:
Can We Prove God Exists?
The Ontological Argument

From St Anselm, Proslogium, trans. Sidney Norton Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1903). Reprinted by permission of Open Court Publishing Company, a division of Carus Publishing Company, Peru, IL.

Anselm (1033-1109) of Canterbury was born in Aosta, Italy. In 1093 he was made Archbishop of Canterbury. During his years in the abbey he wrote the two works for which he is best known, The Monologium and The Proslogium. Anselm's name will forever be associated with the ontological argument for God's existence, which holds that the idea of God in one's mind is evidence of a genuinely existing being.

Philosophy and religion have always had a close but uneasy relationship. For some, the two mean practically the same thing, since the concept of a way of life seems essential to both of them. Both religion and philosophy seem to share the aim of searching for the key to living well. On the other hand, many have argued that philosophy has no need of a special revelation, or even of the concept of a supreme being, whereas religion seems to require both. And some claim philosophy is regulated by canons of logical procedure, whereas many religions are based sheerly on emotion and feeling. As you think through your own conception of religion, you will want to consider two ways in which philosophers have always thought they could add something to religion. The first of these is a consideration of arguments for God's existence, and the other is a treatment of the definition or nature of God, particularly as it concerns the great problem of human evil and suffering.

Most people believe that God exists, and many have attempted to give rational arguments or proofs for his existence. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) said that there are only three possible bases on which to prove God's existence: no experience, many experiences, and one experience. He called the first of these the ontological argument, the second the cosmological argument, and the third the teleological argument. The ontological argument was first given by St. Anselm, who claims that once we understand the nature of God as a "being than which nothing greater can be conceived," we realize that his essence implies his existence. One might put the argument in other words, and argue that God is a perfect being, and it is an imperfection not to exist. Hence, since God is perfect, he must exist.

In the following selections Anselm's extended argument for God's existence is presented along with a counterargument by a certain monk named Gaunilo, who claimed that, if Anselm is correct, then we must conclude the existence of a perfect island, or indeed a perfect anything at all. If it is greater to exist than not to exist, then there must be a greatest member of any class of beings whatsoever. Anselm's response focuses on his position that God alone cannot be conceived not to exist. Anything else can be so conceived. Therefore the argument works only in the case of God.

To Study

1. What is St. Anselm's conception of God?
 2. What argument does St. Anselm offer as proof that this God exists? State a formal manner.
 3. According to St. Anselm, in what way may God be conceived not to exist?
 4. State Gaunilo's criticism. What is Anselm's reply?
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... Lord, I acknowledge and I thank thee that thou has created me in this, thine image, in order that I may be mindful of thee, may conceive of thee, and love thee; but that image has been so consumed and wasted away by vices, and obscured by the smoke of wrong-doing, that it cannot achieve that for which it was made, except thou renew it, and create it anew. I do not endeavor, O Lord, to penetrate thy sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe—that unless I believed, I should not understand....

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. Or is there no such nature, since the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God? ... 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.

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.

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 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....

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 less degree it belongs to it to exist. Why, then, has the fool said in his heart, there is no God ... 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? ...

But how has the fool said in his heart what he could not conceive; or how is it that he could not conceive what he said in his heart? Since it is the same to say in the heart, and to conceive.

But, if really, nay, since really, he both conceived, because he said in his heart, and did not say in his heart, because he could not conceive, there is more than one way in which a thing is said in the heart or conceived. For, in one sense, an object is conceived when the word signifying it is conceived; and in another, when the very entity which the object is, is understood.

In the former sense, then, God can be conceived not to exist; but in the latter, not at all. For no one who understands what fire and water are can conceive fire to be water, in accordance with the nature of the facts themselves, although this is possible according to the words. So, then, no one who understands what God is can conceive that God does not exist; although he says these words in his heart, either without any, or with some, foreign signification. For; God is that than which a greater cannot be conceived. And he who thoroughly understands this assuredly understands that this being so truly exists, that not even in concept can it be non-existent. Therefore, he who understands that God so exists cannot conceive that he does not exist.

I thank thee, gracious Lord, I thank thee; because what I formerly believed by thy bounty, I now so understand by thine illumination, that if I were unwilling to believe that thou dost exist, I should not be able not to understand this to be true.

GAUNILO'S CRITICISM

For example: 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.

ST. ANSELM'S REJOINDER

A criticism of Gaunilo's example, in which he tries to show that in this way the real existence of a lost island might be inferred from the fact of its being conceived.

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 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 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.

THESE ARE THE OBJECTIONS THOMAS AQUINAS CONSIDERS AND REJECTS:

Objection 1. It seems that God does not exist; because if one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed. But the name God means that He is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. Therefore God does not exist.

Objection 2. Further, it is superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, supposing God did not exist. For all natural things can be reduced to one principle, which is nature; and all voluntary things can be reduced to one principle, which is human reason or will. Therefore there is no need to suppose God's existence.

On the Contrary, It is said in the person of God: I am Who am (Exod. iii. 14).

THE EXISTENCE OF GOD (This is in Cantor, *The Medieval Reader*)

God's existence can be proved in five ways. The first and clearest proof is the argument from motion. It is certain, and in accordance with sense experience, that some things in this world are moved.

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The fifth way is from the governance of things. We see how some things, like natural bodies, work for an end even though they have no knowledge. The fact that they nearly always operate in the same way, and so as to achieve the maximum good, makes this obvious, and shows that they attain their end by design, not by chance. Now things which have no knowledge tend towards an end only through the agency of something which knows and also understands, as an arrow through an archer. There is therefore an intelligent being by whom all natural things are directed to their end. This we call God.

Reply Obj.1. As Augustine says: Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works; unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil. This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good.

Reply Obj. 2. Since nature works for a determinate end under the direction of a higher agent, whatever is done by nature must be traced back to God as to its first cause. So likewise whatever is done voluntarily must be traced back to some higher cause other than human reason and will, since these can change and fail; for all things that are changeable and capable of defect must be traced back to an immovable and self-necessary first principle as has been shown.

A FORMULATION OF ST. ANSELM'S ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FROM THE *PROSLOGION*

1. (We understand that) God is SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED.
2. The Fool understands the phrase SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED.
3. If anyone understands a word or phrase for X, then X is in his/her understanding.
4. If X is in someone's understanding and does not exist in reality, and Y exists in reality, then Y is greater than X.
5. If X is in someone's understanding and does not exist in reality, then if anything exists in reality, it is greater than X.
6. Assume: SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED does not exist in reality.
7. SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED is in the Fool's understanding.
8. The Fool can imagine that SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED exists in reality.
9. If SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED is in someone's understanding and SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED does not exist in reality, then if anything exists in reality, it is greater than SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED.
10. SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED is in someone's understanding.
11. If anything exists in reality, it is greater than SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED.
12. If P then Q, then anyone who can conceive that P can conceive that Q.
13. If SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED exists in reality, then SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED is greater than SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED.
14. Anyone who can conceive that SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED exists in reality can conceive that SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED is greater than SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED.
15. The Fool can imagine that SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED is greater than SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED.
16. The Fool can imagine something greater than SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED.
17. Something greater than SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED can be conceived.
18. But, 17 is absurd, so
19. SOMETHING THAN WHICH A GREATER CANNOT BE CONCEIVED exists in reality.