

For next time:

Read St. Thomas Aquinas, “The
Existence of God,” pp. 80-82.

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Saint Anselm (1033-1109)



- One of the great Christian philosophers and theologians of the 11th century
- Most important philosophical works: *The Monologion* (1075-76), *The Proslogion* (1077-78)
- Canonized in 1494

Two Kinds of Justification, and two Kinds of Arguments: *A priori* vs. *aposteriori*

- *A priori* justification
- *A posteriori* justification

- An argument is an *a priori argument* if and only if no premise of the argument is justified a posteriori; an argument is an *a posteriori argument* if and only if at least one of its premises is justified a posteriori.
- Anselm's ontological argument is an a priori argument: he thinks that God's existence can be demonstrated simply by analyzing and reflecting on the concept of God.

The Ontological Argument

- “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God” (Psalm 14:1 KJV).
- Even the fool (or, atheist) has the concept of GOD and understands the meaning of the word ‘God’ when he hears it or uses it.
- The concept of GOD is that of *a being than which none greater is conceivable*, and the meaning of the term ‘God’ just is this concept.

- So, God exists in the understanding.

—If God did not exist at least in the understanding, then we wouldn't be able to rationally debate God's existence.

—The word "God" would have no meaning to enable such a debate. The theist's and the fool's positions would be rendered *nonsensical*.

- Let us assume, for the moment, that the fool is correct, that God does *not* exist in reality.
- Given this assumption, we can now conceive of a being exactly like God, except that it exists in reality, as well as the understanding. (Let's refer to this being as *Super God*.)
- But since, according to Anselm, any being that exists in the understanding *and* in reality is greater than a being that exists *only* in the understanding, Super God is a greater conceivable being than God.

- Thus, God is *not* the being than which no greater being is conceivable.
- But we've already agreed that even the fool understands that God is the greatest conceivable being.
- Thus, God both is *and* is not that than which no greater being is conceivable.

Contradiction



- So, since our original assumption (that God does not exist in reality) leads to a contradiction, that assumption must be false.
- Therefore, God does exist in reality.

A Closer Look at the Argument: Some Crucial Assumptions

- **Def:** God is that than which no greater being is conceivable.
- **The Greatness Principle (GP):** For all things x and y that exist in the understanding, if x exists in reality and y does not, then x is greater than y .
 - Any individual that exists both in reality and in the understanding is greater than one that exists merely in the understanding.

- **The Law of Non-Contradiction:** Nothing can both be and not be in the same respect and at the same time.
 - Where P is any proposition, it can't be that both P and Not- P are true simultaneously.
 - Contradictions are *never* true.

The Form of Anselm's Argument

- ***Reductio Ad Absurdum*** (“reduction to the absurd”): Demonstrates the truth of a proposition by deriving a contradiction from its negation.
 - So, if we wish to show that some proposition P is true, we'll start by assuming its negation, Not- P .
 - Then we do a bit of reasoning *under this assumption* to reach a contradiction.
 - We thereby show that the assumption, Not- P , is false.
 - P must be true, then, since its negation, Not- P , is false. (For all propositions P , it is necessary that either P or its negation, Not- P , is true.)

A more formal statement of the argument

- Assumption for *reductio*: God does not exist in reality.
- Premise: Another being (Super God) is conceivable that is just like God, except that it exists in reality.
- C1: Thus, God is *not* that than which none greater is conceivable. (From Premise and GP.)
- C2: Thus, God both is and is not that than which none greater is conceivable. (By **Def** and C1.)
- C3: Therefore, God does exist in reality. (By C2 and the Law of Non-Contradiction.)

Some Objections to Anselm's Ontological Argument

- Objection 1: **Def** is false.

- Replies to Objection 1:

- 1st Reply

- 2nd Reply: OK, so **Def** is false; God isn't the greatest conceivable being. But we can fix it by substituting for the name 'God' another name, say, 'Schmod' to get:
 - Def *: Schmod is that than which no greater being is conceivable.

Now we run the argument again and establish that Schmod, the greatest conceivable being, exists in reality. Isn't that still interesting?

So, this objection, even if true, doesn't prevent the (slightly revised) argument from establishing a remarkable conclusion (i.e., that *Schmod exists!*).

- Objection 2 (*Gaunilo's Objection*):
There are infinitely many arguments of the same *form* that purport to establish the existence of all sorts of ridiculous beings that we would never accept as existing. Anselm's reasoning, therefore, must be *fallacious*.

Gaunilo's Parody Argument

- First, we substitute for each occurrence of 'God' in **Def** an occurrence of 'The Lost Island', and then for every occurrence in the argument of the word 'being' an occurrence of 'island.'
 - The Lost Island is that than which no greater island is conceivable.
 - Assume, for *reductio*, that the Lost Island does not exist in reality.

- Now we can conceive of another island (call it *Super Island*) that is exactly like the Lost Island, except that it does exist in reality.
- But, then, Super Island is a greater conceivable island than the Lost Island (since it exists *both* in the understanding and in reality).
- Thus, the Lost Island is *not* that than which no greater island is conceivable.

- But now we get a contradiction: that the Lost Island is *and* is not the greatest conceivable island.
- Thus, our original assumption (that the Lost Island does not exist in reality) leads to a contradiction and so is false.
- Thus, the Lost Island, *the greatest conceivable island*, does exist in reality.

- **Objection 3 (Kant's Objection):** Anselm's argument rests on a fundamental mistake in treating existence as an ordinary property.
 - The English verb 'exists' is not a predicate, or at least not a predicate that expresses a legitimate concept or property of individuals.
 - *Existence* is not some additional property a thing can have on top of the other properties it has.
 - One cannot invoke some supposed concept or property of *existence* in forming the concept of something. (E.g., if we wish to form the concept of a greatest conceivable being, it is illegitimate to include in that concept some supposed property of existence in reality; we cannot, so to speak, *define* entities into existence.)
 - *Existence* is a *precondition* for having any properties at all.

Some worries about Kant's Objection

'Exists' certainly seems to be a predicate of English: Sentences formed with 'exists' occurring in verb phrase position (e.g., 'Luke exists,' 'A third planet from the sun exists', etc.) are perfectly grammatical sentences of English.

Moreover, is it really the case that there is no perfectly legitimate concept or property of existence for individuals? Why suppose not?

Is it really the case that existence is instead a precondition for having any properties at all—can non-existent individuals still have properties?