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**Prompt:** *Anselm purports to prove that God exists. Explain his “proof.” Is it a genuine proof, or is it flawed in some way? If you think there is a flaw, explain what the flaw is. Does Gaunilo’s similar “proof” of the existence of a most perfect island show that Anselm’s argument is flawed? Why or why not? Should a rational theist need a proof of God’s existence in the first place?*

## Anselm's Ontological Argument (Rewrite)

In this paper we will analyze one of the earliest arguments for the existence of God, *The Ontological Argument* by Anselm of Canterbury, and contend its validity. We will also describe Gaunilo's perfect island counter-argument and assess its merits.

In his *Ontological Argument*, Anselm attempts to prove the existence of God, in the sense of an absolutely perfect being. Let us describe his argument in a concise premise-conclusion form:

**Premise 1.** *God is the most perfect being. [Definition]*

**Premise 2.** *People can think about a most perfect being.*

**Conclusion 1.** *People can think about God.*

**Premise 3.** *Things that people can think about exist in the mind.*

**Conclusion 2.** *God exists in the mind.*

**Premise 4.** *God can exist either in the mind alone or in both the mind and reality.*

**Premise 5.** *To exist in reality is to be more perfect than solely existing in the mind.*

**Conclusion 3.** *A God that exists only in the mind is not the most perfect.*

**Conclusion 4.** *God must exist in both the mind and reality.*

**Premise 1** is a definition, which comes from Anselm's view of God, as an absolutely perfect being.

**Premise 2** and **Premise 3** are justified by Anselm's claim that "even the fool must admit that something than which nothing greater can be thought exists at least in his understanding, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood exists in the understanding".<sup>1</sup>

**Premise 4** is exemplified by Anselm's description of a painter. Before doing anything, a painting will exist in the mind of a painter. However, upon completion of the painting, it will exist in both the painter's mind and reality.<sup>2</sup> **Premise 5** is an assertion made by Anselm, which we have no

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<sup>1</sup>*The Ontological Argument*, Anselm of Canterbury

reason to believe. While Anselm's overall proof is thought-provoking and well contrived, we will, in the following paragraphs, analyze the truthfulness of his premises and expose a major hole in his logic in order to challenge the validity of the argument.

Two trivial attacks on Anselm's argument can be made by questioning the truthfulness of **Premise 2** and **Premise 5**. In the case of **Premise 2**, although Anselm justifies the understanding of God, one could argue that it is impossible for something perfect to exist in the understanding or mind of something imperfect. Since 1) humans judge the perfection of what they think about and 2) humans are imperfect, their judgement must be imperfect as well. Hence, there is no sure way to assess the correctness of this judgement and thus impossible to know if humans can truly imagine a most perfect being. The fact that most people cannot agree on the meaning of perfection substantiates this claim. For example, colonials who believed it was a God-given right to own slaves probably perceived this "most perfect being" as a slave owner, whereas today most would disagree.

One could counter this argument by claiming that while people cannot agree on what the Loch Ness monster is like (big and blue vs small and yellow), that does not show that people cannot think about the Loch Ness monster. However, I will argue that this sort of logic only holds for things which do not exist. Since there is no such thing as the Loch Ness monster, people could imagine any sort of "monster" and label it as the Loch Ness, because names are purely arbitrary. Now, take for example, MIT, an institution which does exist. Anyone who is thinking about MIT can think of a number of things, ranging from the Infinite Corridor to the beaver mascot to the city of Cambridge. However, someone who thinks about a school with a tree mascot that is located in Palo Alto clearly is not thinking about MIT. If we argue that God exists in reality, then peoples' thoughts about God must be correct (according to his form in reality), otherwise they would not be thinking about God. This, however, seems improbable due to the imperfection of human reason. If we accept that people can have wrong thoughts about God, but claim that they are still thinking about God, then we are

insinuating that God does not exist in reality.

In the case of **Premise 5**, Anselm offers no justification as to why something that exists in reality is more perfect than something that exists solely in understanding. One could, in fact, argue that this assertion is incorrect. What is the only difference between an umbrella I imagine and an equivalent umbrella in reality? The real umbrella can protect me from rain, while the mental one cannot. Thus, in claiming that existence in reality implies more perfection, Anselm says that things which actually affect us are more perfect than those that do not. However, if I were to imagine a serial killer, is that serial killer less perfect than a serial killer which exists in reality? The trait of killing is not one that should belong to a perfect being. However, the serial killer in reality actually kills people, while the one in my mind does not. This would imply that the serial killer in my mind is a more perfect being than the real one. Thus, we can provide evidence indicating that Anselm's definition of perfection is false.

If, however, we accept Anselm's assumptions in **Premise 2** and **Premise 5** as truth, there still remains a major flaw in his logic. Anselm begins by defining God as the most perfect being [**Premise 1**] and eventually concludes that God exists in the mind [**Conclusion 2**]. However in his use of **Premise 5** to reach **Conclusion 3**, he directly contradicts **Conclusion 2**. By claiming that God in the mind is "less" perfect than God in reality, Anselm says that God in the mind is not perfect. By his own definition of God [**Premise 1**], God in the mind is in fact not God, debasing **Conclusion 2**. Additionally, the notion that a "less" perfect God could exist in the mind simultaneously with the perfect God in reality [**Conclusion 4**] contradicts **Premise 1**. There is either a perfect being who is God or there is not, there are no varying levels of perfection which can be used to justify God's existence in reality. To summarize, in order for the entity which exists in the mind to be God, it must be perfect. In trying to justify God's existence in reality, Anselm claims that God in the mind is not perfect. This means the entity is not actually God and could not have originally been used to

justify the existence of God in reality.

A monk named Gaunilo attempted to demonstrate the flaws of Anselm's logic by applying the proof of a perfect God to the proof of a perfect island. The parody goes as follows:

**Premise 1.** *The Perfect Island "has an inestimable wealth of all manner of riches and delicacies [and] is more excellent than all other countries."* <sup>2</sup>

**Premise 2.** *People can think about an island with such wealth.*

**Conclusion 1.** *People can think about the Perfect Island.*

**Premise 3.** *Things that people can think about exist in the mind.*

**Conclusion 2.** *The Perfect Island exists in the mind of people.*

**Premise 4.** *The Perfect Island can exist either in the mind alone or in both the mind and reality.*

**Premise 5.** *To exist in reality is to be more perfect than solely existing in the mind alone.*

**Conclusion 3.** *The Perfect Island that exists only in the mind of people is not the most perfect.*

**Conclusion 4.** *The Perfect Island must exist in both the mind and reality.*

Gaunilo claims that "if someone should tell [him] that there is such an island [as the Perfect Island], [he] should easily understand his words, in which there is no difficulty." <sup>4</sup> However, he implies that if someone were to use this parody of Anselm's *Ontological Argument* to justify the existence of the Perfect Island, he would find it ludicrous. While Gaunilo's analogy of the argument with an island does make Anselm's argument appear absurd, it does not actually expose the flaw in his argument or directly challenge it. In fact, a proponent of Anselm's argument could even claim that Gaunilo's argument does not hold, since they can imagine a perfect being, but not a perfect island. For this reason, I propose a more concrete version of Gaunilo's argument, the Perpetual Motion Argument.

Perpetual motion is motion of bodies that continues indefinitely.<sup>3</sup> Any person can imagine some form of perpetual motion, such as the infinite swinging of a rock in a circle, since it just requires the

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<sup>2</sup>Gaunilo's Ontological Argument Parody

<sup>3</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perpetual\\_motion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perpetual_motion)

repetition of already observable physical phenomena. Furthermore, we define perpetual motion to be the most perfect form of energy production, since it would require no input and produce infinite amounts of energy. Now, using Anselm's argument, we can claim that since perpetual motion exists in the mind but would be more perfect if it existed in reality, it must exist in reality. However, it has been proven mathematically that perpetual motion cannot exist in reality, as it defies the laws of physics (i.e. Noether's Theorem<sup>4</sup>). Thus, we have found a direct contradiction of Anselm's argument that is far more enticing than Gaunilo's argument, since there is no confusion over the definition of perpetual motion and there is clear evidence against its existence in reality.

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<sup>4</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noether%27s\\_theorem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noether%27s_theorem)