Anselm, The Argument and Some Contradictions

One of the more famous arguments for the existence of an all-perfect God is Anselm’s ontological argument. The general purpose of this argument is to show that it is self-contradictory to deny that there exist a greatest possible being. Thus, from here it is a necessary truth that the greatest possible being exists. It is worth reflecting that the argument about the ontological existence of God is necessarily unique, because it cannot be deduced by using information from the world around you. If one were to try to prove the existence of viruses, or unicorns exist, it is not enough to simply reflect on the concepts. One must go out into the world and conduct an empirical investigation using senses. In general, positive and negative existential claims concerning a God can only be established using empirical methods, as will be made clear when the argument is explained.

Anselm’s argument can essentially be summarized into 6 statements.

1. It is a conceptual truth that God is a being in which none greater can be imagined, that is, the greatest possible being that can be imagined.
2. God exists as an idea in the mind.
3. A being that exists as an idea in the mind and in reality is indeed greater than a being which exists only as an idea in the mind.
4. Thus, if God were to exist only as an idea in the mind, then we can imagine something that would be greater than God.
5. But it is impossible to imagine something which is greater than God, for it is a contradiction to suppose that we can imagine a being greater than the greatest possible being that can be imagined.
6. Therefore God exists.

Intuitively, one can think of the argument as being powered by two ideas. The first is premise 2, which states that we as humans can conceptualize the coherent idea that a being exists which is the most perfect possible being. Premise 3 states that accordingly, the very concept of a being that instantiates all perfections implies that it exists. Nonexistence essentially implies something which is an imperfection, therefore the most perfect being must exist.

This argument, while logically interesting, is riddled with logical fallacy. Gaunilo, is responsible for one of the most important criticisms of Anselm’s argument. Anselm’s argument illegitimately moves from the existence of an idea to that of a thing which corresponds to the idea. Anselm defines things into existence, which cannot logically be done. Gaunilo comes up with the idea of an island that which none greater can be conceived. This is easily understood, and logically sound. Gaunilo moves on to say, by logical inference that:

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 in both 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 the island, and so the island understood by you to be more excellent, will not be more excellent. (Southernct.edu)

Thus, Gaunilo’s argument proceeds by attempting to use Anselm’s strategy to deduce the existence of a perfect island, which Gaunilo views as a counterexample to the argument form.

The ontological argument tries to prove the existence of God by establishing the necessity of God’s existence through an explanation of the concept of existence or necessary being. The same arguments that could be used to prove an all-powerful god, could also be used to prove the existence of an all-powerful devil. For example it is conceivable in our minds the existence of a being of which none more evil can exist. A being which exists in reality would be inherently more evil than one which exists in the mind, therefore there must exist a being in reality of which none more evil can be conceived. Logically, this follows in the same fashion that Anselm’s argument follows. The argument which could prove the existence of a being more evil than which no other can be conceived follows just as easily as the argument of a being of which none greater can be conceived. Using Anselm’s logic we can now conceive of two all-powerful beings, one which is an all-powerful god, and one which is an all-powerful devil. This incites a contradiction, because there cannot exist two all-powerful beings, for one’s power must be subordinate to the other. This is an example of the weakness in this type of theorizing.

This argument, while flawed in several ways, is widely considered to be one of the most interesting arguments ever devised. It attempts to argue for the existence of God through priori reasoning alone, meaning independent of existence. This requires only abstract reasoning, similar to an Einsteinian thought experiment, the likes of which were conducted hundreds of years later. This priori style makes this type of reasoning is very different from the reasoning used in most other arguments. Regardless of religious belief, or how convincing the argument is as Anselm presents it, the way that the logic follows is inherently beautiful, and this argument has extended too many other important philosophical and theological matters.