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Essay Assignment 1

Phil110A Introduction to Philosophy: Knowledge and Reality

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A proof of the existence of God would be the most important discovery in all of human history. It is therefore absolutely essential that any attempt to prove God should be scrutinized until it remains undeniably and wholly correct. In response to Anselm's proof using the “Ontological Argument”, Gaunilo dutifully criticizes the foundation of Anselm's reasoning and concludes that it is does not provide sufficient justification for the existence of God. Through careful analysis, Gaunilo successfully resolves that Anselm's argument is flawed and illustrates that without further support and explanation it is impossible to consider this argument as a definitive proof of God's existence.

Anselm begins by introducing the idea of “something that which nothing greater can be thought” (Anselm, 26). This something, which will be referred to as TWNGT, is the greatest thing a person's mind can imagine and is a supreme being. Anselm defines this being to be God and attempts to introduce this being into reality by enforcing the idea that if TWNGT can be thought to only exist in the mind than this being is not supreme. If TWNGT is thought to only exist in the mind than a being with matching qualities as TWNGT that also can be thought to exist in reality would necessarily be thought to be greater. At this point Anselm's argument reaches a contradiction since by definition, TWGNT has no superior and therefore TWGNT must be a being that can be thought to exist in reality. He reasons that any person who is described this being will be able to hold the concept in his or her thoughts. If someone holds the concept of TWGNT in his or her mind and takes the time to understand what this means, they must necessarily realize that this being exists in reality as well. By the logic he has described it should not be possible for someone to understand TWGNT, who is God, and disagree with his conclusion that this being must exist.

In Gaunilo's response to Anselm, he uses counterexamples and logical reasoning to illustrate how Anselm's argument is inaccurate and incomplete. Gaunilo uses the counterexample of a “Lost Island” (Gaunilo, 26) to show that the way that Anselm translates the idea of TWGNT from solely existing in the mind to existing in reality is in error. By counterexample, suppose that there is an island that can be thought of to be greater than all other islands a person could imagine. Gaunilo describes this island to have more wealth and happiness than any other conceivable island. As any person can see, this island cannot possibly exist in reality, however, using the logical progression used by Anselm, it is possible to similarly bring this island into existence. Gaunilo parallels Anselm's procedure and suggests that if a person were to imagine this island, he or she would necessarily conclude that if it was the greatest island of which they could conceive, it must be thought to exist in reality, otherwise a real island would be greater. Anselm's own reasoning can bring to life an object that cannot possibly exist and Gaunilo concludes that Anselm has made a mistake. The idea that a greatest being must exist because if it did not then it was not the best is not a thorough enough proof for Gaunilo to agree with Anselm on this ultimate issue.

Gaunilo's assessment of Anselm's argument reveals that Anselm's proof cannot possibly be correct in its current form. Gaunilo's primary criticism of the argument is hinged on Anselm's vague description of a being that is greater than all other beings. Through Anselm's ambiguous use of the word “greater”, it is possible to apply his reasoning to fictional objects such as “the greatest island”, a place wealthier and happier than all other islands in existence. As noted in lecture, God is great because of his unlimited “knowledge, power and moral goodness”. This island cannot be brought into existence using the same technique as for TWNGT because the rulers of this island can not possibly possess these qualities in the same way as God would, and the world would not be strictly greater by bringing this island into existence.

Even if Anselm had made this definition of “greater” clearer in his original argument, the point Gaunilo is making with his counterexample of a “Lost Island” is still relevant. As another counterexample to Anselm, it is possible to imagine a being that is also TWNGT with the exception that this second being is minutely less powerful. This type of second being would resolve the issue of the Lost Island, since it could only benefit reality to have a second being with infinite knowledge and moral goodness in existence. While this being has slightly less power than the first, and could even have been created by the first, it would only complement reality to exist alongside the ultimate being TWNGT.

The first being Anselm calls God can still be accepted to be greater than the second, since as Anselm explains, God is greater in its unparalleled “power, knowledge, and moral goodness” and this second being is not as powerful. Applying the original Ontological Argument, since there can be no being except the first that is greater than the second, the second must also exist in reality with slightly less power than the first. If the second being could only be thought to exist in the mind, then this would again reach a contradiction since a third being equal to the second being in all aspects except that it exists in reality would be by definition greater than the second being. Applying an inductive process to this sequence of slightly less powerful beings it is easily possible to use Anselm's argument to bring a pantheon of these very powerful, all-knowing and supremely moral beings into existence. These beings would have no place in Anselm's religion, however it is completely possible for them to exist using his proof of the existence of God.

This counterexample illustrates how the foundation of Anselm's argument is fundamentally flawed. Regardless of how carefully the term “greater” is defined, it is possible to use Anselm's logic to bring into reality any number of beings that many Christians, including Anselm, would likely agree could not possibly exist. Gaunilo's ultimate conclusion against Anselm's argument that there must be a better way to “conclusively prove by argument that there is some higher nature” (Gaunilo, 27) is clearly correct. If people, fools included, are to believe in God, there must be a stronger proof than the one provided by Anselm in order to come to this powerful conclusion.