

ON THE NECESSARY EXISTENCE OF GOD-MINUS

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Abstract

In this paper, we offer a novel *reductio* of Anselm's (in)famous Ontological Argument for the existence of God. We suggest that the argument can be extended to prove the necessary existence of a being that's not quite as great as God, which we call God-minus. Further, we claim that this argument can be extended to prove the existence of any being defined as having a particular amount of greatness relative to God. Assuming, as I think we should, that this is not the case, this conclusion serves to undermine the Ontological Argument.

In this paper, we offer a novel *reductio* of Anselm's (in)famous Ontological Argument for the existence of God.¹ We begin by rehearsing, in brief, Anselm's basic argument. We then suggest that this argument can be extended to prove the necessary existence of a being that's not quite as great as God, whom we refer to as God-minus. We claim, further, that this argument can be extended to prove the existence of any being defined as having a particular amount of greatness relative to God (i.e., any God-minus-*n*). Assuming, as we think we should, that this is not the case, this conclusion serves to undermine the Ontological Argument. Having laid out the *reductio*, we end by considering two potential objections, as well as whether our argument applies to more contemporary, modal versions of the Ontological Argument.

¹ The most famous formulation of the argument is St. Anselm's, in his *Proslogion*, Internet Medieval Sourcebook, trans. Sidney Norton Deane (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/anselm-proslogium.asp>), accessed December 1, 2012.

1. The Ontological Argument

Anselm begins by defining God as “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.”² He then distinguishes two forms of existence: existence in the mind or “understanding” and existence in reality. He illustrates with the example of a painting:

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.³

According to Anselm, existence in reality is greater than mere existence in the mind. Thus, the completed painting is greater than it was in the mind of the painter.⁴ Given this, it follows that “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived” could not exist in the mind alone, for if it did, one could in fact conceive of something greater than it, namely its counterpart that exists in reality. God, it turns out, exists in virtue of His conceptual nature, for a merely conceivable God does not meet the conceptual criteria for being God—being “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.” Somewhat more formally:

- P1** For all conceivable beings X, X is merely conceivable or X exists in reality.
- P2** For all X, if X exists in reality, X is greater than if X is merely conceivable.
- P3** God is defined as the greatest conceivable being.
- P4** If God is merely conceivable, then one can conceive of a greater being: a God that exists in reality.
- P5** Therefore, if God is merely conceivable, then God is not the greatest conceivable being.
- C** Therefore, God is not merely conceivable; God exists in reality.

2. The Reductio

² Anselm, *Proslogion*, Chapter II.

³ Ibid.

⁴ This is, of course, assuming that the completed painting is as great in all other ways as it was in the artist’s mind. Existence is not, on Anselm’s view, a “trump” such that all things in reality are greater than all things in the mind. Rather, otherwise identical things are greater if they exist in reality rather than merely in the mind.

There is a litany of famous objections to Anselm's argument, including some purported *reductios*.⁵ In fact, one of Anselm's contemporaries, Guanilo of Marmoutiers, suggested that Anselm's argument could be extended to prove the existence of a perfect island. Since no such island exists, there must be something wrong with Anselm's argument.⁶

Here, we offer a different extension of Anselm's argument. We begin by assuming, with Anselm, that existence in reality makes something greater than mere existence in the mind. We likewise set aside the various issues that have been raised subsequently concerning, for one, the connection between conceivability and possibility. In short, I assume that all of Anselm's premises, both explicit and suppressed, are true.

With these assumptions in place, let us consider the following being: a being than which only God can be conceived to be greater. That is, we are conceiving of a being that is the smallest distance conceivable down the "greatness scale" from God. Let us call this being God-minus.

What are we to say about God-minus' existence? Suppose God-minus is merely conceivable and does not exist in reality. This creates a problem. After all, if God-minus were merely conceivable and did not exist in reality, then we could conceive of a being that was *between* God-minus and God on the greatness scale. That being, of course, would be a version of God-minus that exists in reality. But here we run into the same trouble we did with God in the original argument: If there is a conceivable being between God-minus and God on the greatness scale, then the being we have called God-minus is, by definition, *not God-minus*. Thus, if by defining God as the greatest conceivable being we ensure that He exists in reality, it is likewise the case that by defining God-

⁵ For an overview of Anselm's argument, as well as objections, see William L. Rowe, "The Ontological Argument," *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*, 14th edition, ed. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau (Boston: Wadsworth, 2011), pp. 25-34.

⁶ Guanilo, "In Behalf of the Fool," Internet Medieval Sourcebook, trans. Sidney Norton Deane (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/anselm-gaunilo.asp>), accessed August 31, 2011.

minus as the greatest conceivable being *except for God*, we ensure that God-minus likewise exists in reality. Somewhat more formally:

- P1** For all conceivable beings X, X is merely conceivable or X exists in reality.
- P2** For all X, if X exists in reality, X is greater than if X is merely conceivable.
- P3** God-minus is defined as the greatest conceivable being, except for God.
- P4** If God-minus is merely conceivable, then one can conceive of two greater beings: a God-minus that exists in reality and God Himself.
- P5** Therefore, if God-minus is merely conceivable, then God-minus is not the greatest conceivable being except for God.
- C** Therefore, God-minus is not merely conceivable; God-minus exists in reality.⁷

It is not hard to see where the argument goes from here. If we can run this argument for God and God-minus, we can surely run it for God-minus-minus, God-minus-minus-minus, and so on *ad infinitum*. At each point on the greatness scale, we can conceive of a being defined as occupying that point on the scale relative to the top (to God). If that being were *merely* conceivable, however, it would not occupy that point on the scale of conceivable beings—its real counterpart would—and thus it would be non-self-identical. Since things cannot be non-self-identical, that being must not be merely conceivable; it must exist in reality.⁸

3. Two Objections

One apparent way to resist our argument would be to claim that God-minus is simply a non-existent God. That is, one might claim that the greatness gained through existence is the smallest gain possible, and thus that an imaginary God is one step down from God. This objection fails for two

⁷ What if God-minus is just a merely conceivable God? This is possible, but implausible. It would have to turn out that the difference between existing in reality and existing merely in the understanding is the smallest move on the greatness scale. In other words, a God that existed only in the understanding would have to be greater than a being that is identical to God except, say, there is one fact he doesn't know. In any case, this possibility does not seriously affect the argument on hand. If God-minus is a merely conceivable God, then we can just run the argument for God-minus-minus, which will be something else.

reasons. The first is simply that this claim is implausible. Compare an imaginary God with a real demi-God—a being with almost, but not quite, God-like powers. Surely, it is obvious that the demi-God is greater. The second reason this objection fails is that it merely delays the *reductio*. Suppose we now consider God-minus-minus. This being would have to exist, for it must have (or lack) some *other* quality that distinguishes it from both God and God-minus. If it did not exist, then it would not be God-minus-minus, for we could imagine a being between it and God-minus—one that had the same difference from God but also existed.

Another apparent way to resist our argument would be to maintain that the argument relies on an implicit premise that greatness is “quantized,” and that this premise is false. Recall that our argument relies on the idea that God-minus is a conceivable being. But if greatness is continuous—i.e., is infinitely divisible—it may seem impossible to conceive of a being “one step down” from God on the greatness scale, for there are no steps. (Or, even if such a being is conceivable, it might not be possible.)

It is not clear, however, that we need this assumption. Our argument is not the only context in which it is useful to be able to move down a scale by infinitesimal amounts. Luckily, in all such contexts, mathematicians have a tool—non-standard analysis—which allows for the [THIS SECTION INCOMPLETE]

4. Plantinga’s Modal Argument

Of course, few people take Anselm’s original formulation of the Ontological Argument to be successful. However, several contemporary philosophers have presented updated, modal versions of

the Ontological Argument. In closing, we will consider how our *reductio* fares against the most famous such argument, from Alvin Plantinga.⁹

The basic thought behind Plantinga's Ontological Argument is that greatness seems to be something that an entity has not only in virtue of its qualities in a particular world, but *across* worlds. According to Plantinga, a maximally excellent being ("excellence" is the term for greatness within a world) would have all of the attributes we assign to God (omnipotence, omniscience, omnibevolence, etc.); a maximally great being would exist, and have maximal excellence, in all possible worlds. If we assume that a maximally great being is possible, then it is actual, for if it were to exist at all, it would exist in all possible worlds (by the definition of greatness).

It is not clear whether we should accept these premises. It is not clear whether this argument succeeds. For our purposes, however, all that matters is whether the argument implies that God-minus exists in the actual world. We contend that it does. First, if a maximally great being is possible, then it seems that a being that is just shy of maximal greatness is possible as well.¹⁰ So God-minus seems possible.

Now, suppose that God-minus does not exist in the actual world. First, it should be clear that, in this case, God-minus would have to exist in all possible worlds *except* the actual world. For if God-minus *also* did not exist in some other possible world, then it seems that we could imagine a being which was *between* God and God-minus in terms of greatness—a being that existed either in the actual world or the *other* possible world in question (but not both).

Now, suppose that one tries to maintain just this—that God-minus exists in all possible worlds but this one. This is, it seems, a reformulation of the first objection to our *reductio* considered

⁹ Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford University Press, 1978.

¹⁰ This should not be confused with the objection from near-maximality discussed by Plantinga, which defines near-maximality such that if near-maximality is instantiated, maximality cannot be.

in §3—that God-minus would just be a non-existent God. Not surprisingly, this position runs up against the same problems we raised above

First, it is simply not plausible that the being in question would be one step down from God. Consider a modal demi-God—a being that exists in *all* possible worlds; in one world, however, it is not maximally excellent (perhaps there is one fact it does not know). Surely, this being would be greater than a being that is maximally excellent in all worlds in which it exists, but that does not exist in the actual world.

In addition, as before, this line seems only to delay the *reductio*. Consider God-minus-minus. Either this being has lost greatness by existing in less worlds than God-minus, or in some other way. If it is in some other way, then God-minus-minus must exist in the actual world, for if it did not, then we could imagine a being between it and God-minus—one which lacked the relevant quality but *did* exist in the actual world. If, on the other hand, God-minus-minus is lesser than God-minus only because it does not exist in some other possible world (as well as not existing in the actual world), then we turn to God-minus-3. Of course, one might maintain that God-minus-3 is just like God except that it does not exist in *three* possible worlds. We would then move on the God-minus-4. Eventually, if we go through all possible beings (especially if there are infinitely many of them, as seems likely), we will get to some that exist in the possible world and are lesser than the ones above it for some non-existence-related reason. The argument will thus prove their existence.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented a novel *reductio* of Anselm's Ontological Argument. We have argued that the same form of reasoning which Anselm uses to demonstrate the existence of God can be extended to demonstrate the existence of any being defined as having a particular amount of greatness less than God. After addressing objections, we considered whether our *reductio* applies to

contemporary, modal versions of the argument. While we cannot hope herein to establish that it will apply to *all* such arguments, we have illustrated how it extends to a particularly famous example—the modal formulation of Alvin Plantinga.