

Ontological Arguments and the Superiority of Existence: Reply to Nagasawa

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Yujin Nagasawa accuses me of attributing to Anselm a principle (the ‘principle of the superiority of existence’, or PSE) which is not present in his text and which weakens, rather than strengthens, his Ontological Argument. I am undogmatic about the interpretative issue, but insist on a philosophical point: that Nagasawa’s rejection of PSE does not help the argument, and appears to do so only because he overlooks the same ambiguity that vitiates the original. My conclusion therefore remains: that the fatal flaw in Anselm’s argument—as in many other variants—is a relatively shallow ambiguity rather than a deep metaphysical mistake.

In his interesting article ‘Millican on the Ontological Argument’ (1997), Yujin Nagasawa rejects my criticism of the argument, suggesting that the ‘theory of natures’ which I use to represent Anselm’s reasoning fails to do it justice. Nagasawa particularly highlights the role of what he calls my ‘principle of the superiority of existence’ (PSE), maintaining that if this is discarded, then an otherwise similar Anselmian argument can completely evade my criticisms (even if it might be objectionable in some other way).

In responding to Nagasawa, I shall start with some comments on the interpretation of Anselm, then briefly summarize the treatment of Ontological Arguments proposed in my original article. Having shown how Anselm’s argument fails if PSE is assumed, I shall go on to demonstrate that—whatever the merits of Nagasawa’s interpretative claims—the Anselmian argument that he proposes fails in a closely related way. Moreover in supposing that his argument succeeds, he is overlooking exactly the same ambiguity as Anselm, thereby further illustrating its perennial seductiveness. I shall end by reiterating my view that Anselm’s Ontological Argument cannot be weakened (and might be strengthened) by appeal to the principle of the superiority of existence. Thus I remain convinced that the form of the argument presented in my original paper is the strongest available, and hence that the ‘One

Fatal Flaw' identified in that paper indeed succeeds in killing Anselm's argument beyond any possibility of resurrection.

1. On the interpretation of Anselm

Nagasawa is critical of my interpretation on two main points.¹ First, 'According to Millican, a theory of natures upon which Anselm is alleged to rely entails that no possible interpretation of the ontological argument can yield the conclusion that God exists' (p. 1027). Thus there is a suggestion of unfairness in my 'maintain[ing] that Anselm subscribes implicitly to this theory of natures' (p. 1028). Secondly, Nagasawa pays 'particular attention to Millican's assumption that Anselm relies on ... the "principle of the superiority of existence" (PSE)'. He argues 'that (i) the textual evidence that Millican cites does not provide a convincing case that Anselm relies on PSE and that, moreover, (ii) Anselm does not even need PSE for the ontological argument' (p. 1027).

But whatever the verdict on the philosophical merits of offering Anselm my theory of natures in general, or the principle of superiority of existence in particular, I plead 'not guilty' to the charge of misinterpretation, as witness the following quotations from my paper:

Given this dissociation of 'natures' from traditional essences, the theory [of natures] that emerges cannot pretend to be one that Anselm himself would have endorsed in detail. (p. 449)

... nothing that Anselm says makes clear what advantages in other respects, if any, are sufficient to outweigh the additional share of greatness that is conferred on a nature which is instantiated in reality as compared with one which is not.

At this point, therefore, it will considerably streamline our discussion if we make a simplifying assumption which, though not unquestionably Anselmian, at least has the authority of having been stated by his correspondent Gaunilo without being contested by him. Namely, *that among the various criteria for greatness (power, wisdom, goodness etc.), real existence 'trumps' all others, so that any nature which has a real archetype, however lowly its characteristic properties may be, will on that account alone be greater than any nature, however impressively characterized, which does not.* (p. 451, italics added)

¹ Nagasawa also criticizes my 'Antigod' parody argument (in his n. 5, p. 1032), making the reasonable point that 'effectively evil' is a somewhat infelicitous term for a concept *E* which is defined in such a way that any instantiated nature (even if characterized as morally impeccable) is more *E* than any non-instantiated nature (even if the latter is characterized as thoroughly wicked). Maybe 'dangerously effective' or simply 'bad' (i.e. nothing *worse* can be thought) would be a more appropriate, or perhaps some more complex phrase is required. However neither the argument's logic nor the import of its conclusion hangs on the shorthand term, because the concept is explicitly defined by four criteria (p. 461). So even if inelegantly expressed, the parody objection remains.

The italicized principle is, of course, PSE, and Gaunilo's apparent endorsement of this principle—uncorrected by Anselm—clearly gives it some claim to historical authority. However I have no strong opinion on whether or not Anselm fully accepted the principle, either when composing his original argument or when responding to Gaunilo.² Indeed given his tolerance of ambiguity elsewhere in his argument, I see no compelling reason to suppose that he even had a firm view on the matter. But this is anyway of little relevance to my case, since my main reason for adopting PSE in representing Anselm's reasoning was explicitly philosophical rather than scholarly: to *simplify* the logic of the theory of natures *without weakening* the argument:

As we shall see later (n. 42), the logic of Anselm's argument could not possibly be strengthened (and might well be weakened) if instead we were to assume that some significant superiority in power, wisdom and goodness can outweigh an inferiority in existential status when assessing a nature's greatness, and this would also make the illustration of the theory's implications far more cumbersome. (p. 452, n. 26)

Hence in what follows I shall put to one side the scholarly issue of Anselm's endorsement of the principle, and focus only on issues relevant to the logic of his argument. In particular, I shall now try to refute Nagasawa's claim that the argument, by relinquishing PSE, can evade my general criticism.

2. A general criticism of ontological arguments

I ended my paper by restating and generalising my criticism of Anselm, in a way that makes clear its potential application to many other Ontological Arguments for God's existence, including the famous versions of Descartes and Plantinga, for instance.³ These all proceed in two stages:

² Nagasawa says that

Millican provides three reasons for his claim that Anselm endorses PSE. The first is that what Millican takes as a correct translation of Anselm's relevant sentence in the *Proslogion* seems to prove it. ... According to Millican, [this translation] implies that Anselm endorses PSE. (pp. 1032–1033)

However at no point do I argue in this way, nor do I read the relevant sentence—even in my preferred translation—as implying PSE. At most, it would commit Anselm to a more modest principle, that if any nature is uninstantiated, then it will be exceeded in greatness by *some* instantiated nature.

³ Nagasawa describes my objection to Anselm as 'elaborate' (p. 1027). However the general criticism of which it is a species is fundamentally very simple, and the special complications in applying it to Anselm arise entirely from the multiple ambiguities in his formula, not from any deep philosophical difficulties. I suspect, but cannot prove, that objections in a similar spirit could be made against *all* versions of the Ontological Argument.

- Stage I First, reference is made to some *nature* (*essence, concept, type of thing*, or whatever), which is taken to be an appropriate characterisation of God. Thus Anselm refers to the nature: ‘something than which nothing greater can be thought’, Descartes to the nature: ‘a supremely perfect being’, and Plantinga to an ‘essence’ possessing ‘unsurpassable greatness’.
- Stage II The logical content of the nature thus referred to is then unpacked to reveal that it must be *instantiated*—that is, there must be something real corresponding to this nature. Accordingly Anselm argues that if ‘something than which nothing greater can be thought’ existed only in the Fool’s mind, then something greater would be capable of being thought, and that would be an obvious contradiction. Descartes argues that existence—that is, real instantiation—is a perfection, hence a supremely perfect nature must be really instantiated. Plantinga defines ‘unsurpassable greatness’ in such a way that an essence possessing this property must be instantiated with maximal excellence in every possible world.

Notice that for this strategy to work the *existence of the nature itself* (i.e. there being such a nature to refer to at all at Stage I) must be clearly distinguished from that nature’s *instantiation* (i.e. the existence of a *real archetype*, something in reality corresponding to that nature). If this distinction is not drawn, then the argument is hopeless: the atheist can simply point out that Stage I begs the question by purporting to make reference to something whose existence he denies. Anselm himself clearly recognizes this distinction, in drawing a contrast between *existence in the mind alone* and *existence in reality*. Thus at Stage I he intends to establish the former (i.e. that there is such a nature to be thought of); then at Stage II he argues that this nature must be instantiated in reality also. Descartes likewise starts by saying that he finds the idea of God *within his mind*, and then goes on to argue that *actual and eternal existence* must also belong to this nature. Finally Plantinga clearly distinguishes between *existence in some possible world* and *existence in the actual world*.

To oppose any Ontological Argument of this kind, I recommended that the atheist pose the following sort of dilemma to its proponent:

Is it necessary, in order to qualify as the nature referred to at Stage I, that the nature in question should be instantiated in reality?

If it is necessary, then the atheist should challenge the argument at Stage I and deny that reference to any such nature has been achieved. If it is *not* necessary, then Stage II clearly must fail.

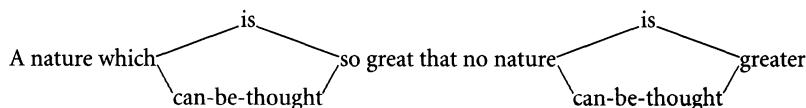
Suppose, for example, that the theist introduces the nature in question as ‘the *G*’, where *G* is some description, and he purports to ensure reference to this nature in Anselmian style by saying to the atheist: ‘Well, you can think of the *G* and understand what I mean by the phrase, so the *G* exists in your mind at least’. In this case, the atheist’s sceptical question should be:

- Is it necessary, in order for a nature to satisfy the description ‘the *G*’,
 (a) that there should *really* be something that is *G*, or is it sufficient
 (b) that something be *thought of as* being *G*?

If the theist answers (a), then the atheist can simply deny that *the G* exists in his mind or anywhere else: the mere fact that he can *think of something as being G, and understands the phrase*, clearly is not enough—even on the theist’s own principles—to show that there really is such a nature. If on the other hand the theist answers (b), then the atheist can insist that Stage II must be fallacious: if it is possible to refer to the relevant nature even if there is nothing that is really *G*, then mere reference to the nature cannot possibly guarantee its instantiation in reality.

3. Anselmian ambiguities

This objection is so straightforward and even crude, that one might well wonder why the Ontological Argument—especially in Anselm’s version—has proved so hard to pin down and refute. The reason, I suggested, is that his key phrase is systematically ambiguous, with different problems arising for the different possible interpretations. This is something like an ambiguity of scope, which arises from an indeterminacy over what extent of the phrase is governed by the ‘can-be-thought’ operator, and we can accordingly schematize the different interpretations as follows:⁴



With two possible readings at each of two points, we have four possible interpretations altogether, of which the first three seem to contribute to the argument’s seductive slipperiness:

⁴The corresponding diagram for Descartes’s argument has a single point of ambiguity, the key phrase being ‘A nature which is/can-be-thought in possession of all perfections including instantiation’.

	Interpretation of 'a-nature-than-which-no- greater-nature-can-be- thought'	Denotation if there is no God (and presuming PSE)	Implications for the success of Anselm's Ontological Argument
(i)	A nature which <i>is</i> so great that no nature <i>is</i> greater (i.e. <i>no greater nature can be thought of</i>)	Refers to whichever nature is in fact the greatest (and it need not be Godlike: e.g. it might be <wise, just, beneficent ruler of most of the known world>). ⁵	Argument succeeds if PSE is true, but in that case it proves only the instantiation of the greatest <i>instantiated</i> nature—hence it fails to prove the existence of <i>God</i> .
(ii)	A nature which <i>can-be-thought</i> so great that no nature <i>can-be-thought</i> greater	Presumably refers to the divine nature <God>, ⁶ since it is possible to think of such a nature as supremely great.	Fails to convict Anselm's Fool of contradiction, because if PSE is true it is then entirely possible for the nature in question to be exceeded in <i>actual</i> greatness.
(iii)	A nature which <i>is</i> so great that no nature <i>can-be-thought</i> greater	There is no such nature (unless God exists)	If no God exists, then no nature is in fact great enough to satisfy the key phrase, so it fails to denote.
(iv)	A nature which <i>can-be-thought</i> so great that no nature <i>is</i> greater	There is a huge range of such natures, maybe from <wise, just, beneficent ruler of most of the known world> to <God>.	Fails to convict Anselm's Fool of contradiction, because it is entirely possible for the nature in question to be exceeded in <i>actual</i> greatness.

⁵ Suppose that one of the Roman emperors (Marcus Aurelius, according to Edward Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*) combined wisdom, justice, beneficence, and absolute power over most of the known world. Then since the nature <wise, just, beneficent ruler of most of the known world> is instantiated, that nature might achieve a higher level of *actual* greatness than any other, at least if PSE is assumed. No doubt it is possible to *think of* situations in which other natures *would be* greater (e.g. if there were a God), but that does not mean that any other nature *is in fact* greater.

⁶ My original article referred to natures such as '<Aurelius>', using proper names within angle brackets, while pointing out that 'this syntax is shorthand only' and that 'the natures have no essential connection to any particular real or imagined individual, and are constituted purely by the descriptive properties that characterize them' (p. 451). However this shorthand can make it tempting to regard them as individual natures, and Nagasawa may have been thus tempted (pp. 1028–1029). To avoid this risk I here replace '<Aurelius>' with its descriptive equivalent, but for consistency with Nagasawa's article retain the term '<God>', understood as short for '<omnipotent, creator of the universe>'. For a comment on other potentially Godlike properties such as 'necessarily existent' (ignored here), see my original article, p. 453 n. 28 and pp. 454–6.

In considering the implications of these different readings, note that for Anselm's argument to have any chance of working, the greatness of a nature (and of his key nature in particular) must potentially depend on whether or not it is instantiated. Such a dependence is required if he is to be able to draw the crucial Stage II inference from his key nature's greatness to its instantiation. The basis of that inference is the contradiction which is supposed to arise if this nature is *not* instantiated, because then, Anselm claims, the nature would not be as great as it has to be to satisfy the description 'something than which nothing greater can be thought'. So he is clearly taking for granted here that the level of greatness achieved by his key nature depends on whether or not it is instantiated.

Let us therefore draw a distinction, quite generally, between how great some nature will be *if it is not instantiated* and how great that nature will be *if it is instantiated*. With this in mind, and for the moment accepting the principle of the superiority of existence (PSE), let us look in turn at the implications of the four interpretations of Anselm's key phrase in the table above.

(i) Given that at least one nature is instantiated, it follows from PSE that the greatest nature will be the greatest *instantiated* nature.⁷ Hence if no Godlike nature is in fact instantiated, then the greatest nature there is cannot be Godlike. But on interpretation (i), Anselm's argument aspires only to prove the instantiation of this actually greatest nature. And so the argument cannot refute atheism, even if it succeeds in proving the real instantiation of 'something than which nothing greater can be thought'.

(ii) On this interpretation, 'something than which nothing greater can be thought' refers to a nature which *can-be-thought* to be unsurpassably great, that is, a nature which is such that *if we think of it as instantiated*, then *we think of it as being* so great that we cannot even think of any nature being greater. But now, given PSE, Stage II of Anselm's argument must clearly fail. For on interpretation (ii), there is absolutely no contradiction in the nature denoted by his key phrase *in fact* failing to be supremely great. Indeed if it is not *in fact* instantiated, then any really instantiated nature will *in fact* be greater.

⁷ For ease of exposition, I take for granted here and in what follows that there are no 'ties' in the competition for greatness, and hence in this case that there is just one greatest nature. If there were two or more equally supreme natures, then some of the points here would have to be slightly reworded, but the essential logic of the situation would remain unchanged (cf. Millican 2004, p. 458, n. 34).

(iii) On this interpretation, ‘something than which nothing greater can be thought’ can only refer to a nature which is *in fact* so great that we cannot even *think of* any nature being greater. But if there is no God, then no nature—even the nature of an omnipotent creator (i.e. <God>)—is *in fact* that great. Indeed this result follows without any dependence on PSE: all that is required is the far more modest (and clearly Anselmian) principle that the nature <God> is greater if it is instantiated than if it is not. This being so, the maximum possible level of *thinkable* greatness will be the greatness of <God> *thought of as instantiated*, and the atheist will of course straightforwardly deny that any nature is *in fact* that great (since he does not believe that <God> is *in fact* instantiated). So on interpretation (iii), with or without PSE, Anselm’s argument fails at Stage I: the atheist can simply insist—and without any apparent risk of self-contradiction—that no nature is *in fact* great enough to satisfy the key phrase.

(iv) On this interpretation, and assuming that there is no God, ‘something than which nothing greater can be thought’ could denote any of the myriad of natures, each of which is such that *if we think of it as instantiated*, then *we think of it as achieving a level of greatness* which is at least as great as the *actual* highest level of greatness. This makes interpretation (iv) useless for Anselm’s purposes, and in any case it fails to legitimate Stage II for the same reason as interpretation (2), though with added complications due to the range of natures potentially involved.⁸ For these reasons, I shall entirely ignore interpretation (iv) from now on.

4. Discarding the Principle of the Superiority of Existence

The upshot so far is that none of our four potential interpretations of Anselm’s key phrase can justify his argument, but it might appear that this criticism—paraphrased from my original article—depends crucially on the principle of the superiority of existence, at least in its treatment of interpretations (i) and (ii). Nagasawa accordingly suggests that Anselm’s argument is handicapped by PSE, and would be strengthened without it. So let us now examine how the argument fares if we discard the principle.

A rejection of PSE implies that it is possible for an uninstantiated nature to exceed in greatness an instantiated nature. But this will make

⁸ For example, all but one of the members of this myriad of natures will be exceeded in both actual and thought greatness by that of other members.

no significant difference to the force of Anselm's argument if such possibilities are limited to very modest instantiated natures: if for example the uninstantiated nature of an omniperfect being is able to exceed in greatness the instantiated nature of a turnip, but not that of any sentient being. In this case, the logical problems would remain more or less exactly as before (with just a little rewording), given the undoubted existence of sentient beings.

For the rejection of PSE to make a significant difference, we must accept that the uninstantiated nature of an omniperfect creator can exceed in greatness even the greatest instantiated nature that the atheist acknowledges. Suppose, for example, that the latter nature is:

<wise, just, beneficent ruler of most of the known world>

whose instantiation—let us presume—is assured by the existence of Marcus Aurelius. Nagasawa's point is that if this can be exceeded in greatness by the nature:

<God>

even if the latter is non-instantiated, then this will change the logical position. To that extent he is quite correct, at least on interpretations (i) and (ii) of the key phrase, but I believe he is wrong to suggest that such a change can save Anselm's argument, which will still fail under either interpretation, though now for a different reason:

	Interpretation of 'a-nature-than-which-no- greater-nature-can-be- thought'	Denotation if there is no God (and rejecting PSE)	Implications for the success of Anselm's Ontological Argument
(i)	A nature which <i>is</i> so great that no nature <i>is</i> greater (i.e. <i>no greater nature can be thought of</i>)	Refers to whichever nature is in fact the greatest: if PSE is false, then even the atheist can agree that this nature is <God>.	Fails to convict Anselm's Fool of contradiction, because if PSE is false, there is no contradiction in the greatest actual nature's failing to be instantiated.
(ii)	A nature which <i>can-be-thought</i> so great that no nature <i>can-be-thought</i> greater	Refers to the nature <God>, since it is possible to <i>think</i> of this nature as supremely great.	Fails to convict Anselm's Fool of contradiction, because there is no inconsistency in this nature's <i>actual</i> greatness being less than its own <i>thinkable</i> greatness.

Recall again how Stage II of Anselm's argument is supposed to work: there must be a contradiction in his key nature's *not* being instantiated, because in that case it would not be as great as it has to be to satisfy the description 'something than which nothing greater can be thought'. But by relaxing PSE, we have made it possible—on interpretation (i) as well as (ii)—for the nature <God> to be 'something than which nothing greater can be thought' *even if it is not instantiated*. So Anselm's Fool cannot now be convicted of contradiction, and stands unrefuted.

All this nicely illustrates the effectiveness of the general criticism explained above: Stage I of the argument can be made to guarantee reference to a Godlike nature—and can do so even under interpretation (i)—but only by crippling Stage II. For if Stage II is to work, then any nature identified by the key Stage I condition must, of necessity, be instantiated. And if the Stage I condition is such as to guarantee reference to a Godlike nature, then the atheist obviously will not agree that reference has been achieved unless it is possible for a nature to satisfy that condition *without* being instantiated. Persuading the atheist at Stage I, therefore, can be achieved only by making Stage II impossible.

5. Nagasawa's Anselmian oversight

Nagasawa, on Anselm's behalf, rejects the principle of superiority of existence and suggests instead that the nature <God>, even if uninstantiated, should be taken to be greater than any other nature, achieving a level of greatness that could be exceeded only if it were itself instantiated. Thus the highest possible level of greatness is that of an *instantiated* <God>, and the next highest is that of an *uninstantiated* <God>. On this basis, and adopting reading (ii) of Anselm's key phrase, Nagasawa writes that under his interpretation:

it is indeed *impossible* for atheists to think of a nature that is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought. Therefore, the argument goes through and successfully yields the conclusion that a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought must be instantiated in reality. (p. 1036)

But for the reasons just explained his 'Therefore' here is a *non sequitur*. True, the Fool can no longer escape contradiction in the way that my previous article highlighted: that is, by taking advantage of PSE which allows <God> to be—without contradiction—exceeded in *actual* greatness. But Nagasawa's rejection of PSE opens up an alternative escape route: now the Fool can readily accept that <God> is indeed the greatest nature, *for it is guaranteed to be so even if it is not instantiated*.

And hence there need be no hint of contradiction in his denial that it is in fact instantiated.

Nagasawa's apparent reason for overlooking this response to his argument is illuminating, and illustrates the seductiveness of Anselm's subtle ambiguity. Before presenting the argument, Nagasawa explains the crucial claim that he thinks the argument requires:

Anselm needs to justify at least the following claim: if there were <God> that is instantiated in reality and <God> that is conceived only in the mind, then the former would be greater than the latter. (p. 1034)

He points out that this claim seems much weaker than PSE, and could plausibly be justified on the relatively modest basis that 'existence is a great-making property'. Then, in spelling out his Anselmian argument, he goes on to explain how the Fool supposedly contradicts himself:

(3') A-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought that is instantiated in reality is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought that is conceived only in the mind (because existence is a great-making property).

(4') So if a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought were not instantiated in reality, then it would be possible to think of one, and only one, nature that is greater; namely, a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought that is instantiated in reality.

(5') But this would be a contradiction, since it is obviously impossible to think of a nature that is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought.

But in all of this Nagasawa—just like Anselm—is blurring the distinction between the level of greatness that some nature *actually* has, and the level of greatness that it *can be thought* to have. Consider, for example, his initial statement of the claim that 'if there were <God> that is instantiated in reality and <God> that is conceived only in the mind, then the former would be greater than the latter'. This conditional may sound plausible, but in fact it is deeply muddled because its antecedent does not describe any possible situation: the nature <God>—which Nagasawa takes to be the referent of Anselm's key phrase—is either instantiated in reality or it is not, *and it cannot be both*. Now with this point in mind look at Nagasawa's step (4'), which says that if <God> were not instantiated in reality, then it would be possible to think of a nature 'that *is* greater', namely, <God> 'that *is* instantiated in reality' (my emphasis). But if <God> is not, in fact, instantiated in reality, then it is not possible to think of any nature that *in fact* achieves this higher level of greatness: thinking of <God> *as instantiated* adds nothing to its

actual level of greatness.⁹ We can, of course, contemplate the level of greatness that it *would have* if it *were* instantiated, and then make a comparison between that supreme level of thought-greatness and the lower level that it *actually* enjoys. But on Nagasawa's favoured interpretation (ii) of Anselm's key formula, this comparison reveals no contradiction: <God> remains 'a nature which can be thought so great that no nature can be thought greater', because in *thinking of it as instantiated* we are *thinking of it as achieving an unsurpassable level of greatness*. To deliver the contradiction alleged in Nagasawa's step (5'), we have to move to interpretation (iii) of Anselm's formula, according to which his key nature is defined as *actually* having a level of greatness than which no greater can be thought. On that interpretation, however, as we saw earlier, the argument stalls right at the beginning, because the Fool can simply deny that there is any such nature. In short, Nagasawa—just like Anselm—can find a contradiction in the Fool's denial that the key nature is instantiated only by equivocating between two different readings of the key formula.

6. Conclusion

Despite Nagasawa's disagreement (pp. 1027, 1034), I stand by the claim quoted in §1 above from footnote 26 of my original article:

As we shall see later (n. 42), the logic of Anselm's argument could not possibly be strengthened (and might well be weakened) if instead we were to assume that some significant superiority in power, wisdom and goodness can outweigh an inferiority in existential status when assessing a nature's greatness ...

My basis for this is exactly as stated in the referenced footnote 42 (p. 464): 'If a nature ... could be greater than [the greatest instantiated non-divine nature] without being instantiated, then clearly Anselm would have no right to suppose even that the actually greatest nature must be instantiated.' So if we adopt Nagasawa's suggestion that <God> can be greater than any other nature even if it is not instantiated (and hence deny the principle of superiority of existence), then Stage II of the argument becomes impossible even on interpretation (i), the only reading of Anselm's key phrase which, with PSE, was able to yield a successful proof (albeit of a non-divine being).

⁹ Nagasawa's words might suggest the idea of adding 'really existing' to <God>'s characteristic properties, so as to yield the nature <omnipotent, creator of the universe, really existing> which in my previous article I called <EGod>. But this does not help him, because if <God> is uninstantiated, then so is <EGod>, and it seems plausible to say that their level of greatness is identical. For discussion of this issue, see my previous article, pp. 453–4.

Since Anselm's argument fails to prove the existence of God in any case, it might seem idle to debate which interpretation of it is most charitable. But one aim of my original article was to demonstrate how slippery it is, able to evade—if suitably interpreted within the context of an appropriate theory of natures—nearly all of the popular objections that have been thrown at it down the ages. The 'One Fatal Flaw' that I identified was the ambiguity in Anselm's key phrase, implying that if this ambiguity was ignored, then every step of the argument could appear legitimate under some reading of that phrase. It was particularly intriguing, from this point of view, to find no fewer than three importantly different readings, failing in three quite different ways: (i) yielding a successful argument but for a non-divine being, (ii) referring to a divine nature but failing to prove its instantiation, and (iii) failing even to secure reference. But this rich variety depends on the principle of superiority of existence.¹⁰ Nagasawa's interpretation of greatness, by entirely rejecting PSE, would undermine this intriguing pattern, making (i) fail in much the same way as (ii), and thus reducing the seductive ambiguity of Anselm's brilliant invention. We do not know Anselm's own settled view on the matter, or even whether he had one. But it seems to me most charitable to offer him an interpretation according to which the multiple ambiguities of his key phrase lead to three interestingly different types of failure, and that is why I consider my version of his argument the strongest available.

Whichever version is strongest, however, my main conclusion stands: the fatal flaw in Anselm's argument is a relatively shallow ambiguity in his key phrase, rather than any deep metaphysical mistake.

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References

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¹⁰ Or some weaker variant of the principle, which at least allows the greatness of an instantiated *sentient being* nature (but maybe not of an instantiated *turnip* nature) to exceed that of an uninstantiated Godlike nature.