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On Anselm's Ontological Argument

Throughout the history of philosophy, few philosophical arguments have caused greater controversy despite its conciseness, simplicity, and seeming coherence like the ontological argument, of its origin being Anselm of Canterbury.

In his book *Proslogion*, Anselm, through his belief that reason and understanding was a necessary product of faith, presented his attempt to not derive, but reveal that even the reasoning of the greatest simplicity could single-handed prove the existence of God, and thus present the interlinked nature of God and reason. The central focus that is placed on the so-called ontological argument in the book *Proslogion* hints at the importance Anselm placed on proving this relationship.

However, it was ironically this overarching focus that the ontological proof had in the *Proslogion* that had befuddled countless philosophers from understanding what exactly constituted Anselm's ontological proof, even leading to some philosophers to conclude that Anselm had not intended to present the proof (Graham) and many others to derive many different interpretations of the proof. Anselm argued even Gaunilo, Anselm's contemporary and the proponent of one of the main criticisms of the proof, had not fully understood the proof that Anselm detailed in his book. One could hardly blame these philosophers for misunderstanding Anselm's proof (if they had done so) - as Anselm does not take care to explicitly define and state his ontological argument. Furthermore, we owe it to their articulations of the argument, especially that of Gaunilo, that we have a clearer picture of what Anselm truly intended in his ontological proof.

These days, one of the common position towards Anselm's treatment of the ontological proof in *Proslogion* is that Anselm had presented two ontological arguments for the existence of God, with each varying slightly, yet significantly from each other.

Of the two, the more articulated argument goes as follows, along with all the premises listed under the arguments:

1) There is a concept of something than which there is no greater, and it is defined to be God.

    a)   Things could be objectively greater than some other thing.

2) Something than which there is no greater exists in our understanding.

    a)   For something to exist in the understanding, it must not be contradictory or incomprehensible.

    b)   Something that which there is greater is not contradictory, and is comprehensible.

3) Something than which there is no greater exists that exists in both our understanding and reality can exist in our understanding.

    a) Premise 2a

    b) Something than which there is no greater exists that exists in both our understanding and reality is not contradictory and is comprehensible.

        i)   Reality is distinct from our understanding.

4) Something that which there is no greater exists that exists in both our understanding and reality is greater than something that which there is no greater that only exists in understanding.

    a) Something that exists in both understanding and reality is greater than something that only exists in understanding.

        i)   Existence is a perfection, or a quality that is good to have.

            (1) Existence is a quality (or a predicate).

5) Thus, by contradiction, something that which there is no greater exists must exist in both understanding and reality.

6) Thus, God, as defined above, must exist both in understanding and reality.

The supposed second ontological argument (or corollary) of Anselm goes as follows:

1) There is a concept of something than which there is no greater, and it is defined to be God.

    a)   Things could be objectively greater than some other thing.

2) Something than which there is no greater exists in our understanding.

    a) For something to exist in the understanding, it must not be contradictory or incomprehensible.

    b) Something that which there is greater is not contradictory, and is comprehensible.

3) Something that necessarily exists in reality is greater than something that does not necessarily exist in reality.

    a) Necessary existence, or capability of existence, is a good thing to have - a perfection.

        i) Necessary existence is a quality.

4) Something that which there is no greater exists that exists in the understanding and must necessarily exist is greater than something that which there is no greater exists that only exists in the understanding.

5) Thus, by contradiction, something that which there is no greater must necessarily exist in reality and understanding.

6) Thus, God must necessarily exist in reality.

With both arguments consisting less than 10 statements each, Anselm's arguments are remarkable in their simplicity and conciseness. Yet, what is and has been evident is its failure to convince the so-called "fools" mentioned in Psalms who do not believe in God - and of the argument's lack of persuasiveness. Why would it be so?

The most direct answer and its reasoning come from Gaunilo. In his response to *Proslogion,* Gaunilo presents one of the possible responses that the supposed "fool" can make - that the ontological proof is not persuasive, as it can be used to demonstrate the existence of any nonexistent thing, like the "Perfect Island" example that Gaunilo gives.

In his response to the ontological argument, Gaunilo presents the following argument of supposedly identical steps to prove the existence of a fictional "Perfect Island":

1. There is a concept of an island than which none greater can be imagined, and it is defined to be the Perfect Island.
    a. One island could be objectively greater than another island.
2. The Perfect Island exists in the understanding.
    a. For something to be in the understanding, it must not be contradictory or incomprehensible.
    b. The concept of Perfect Island is not contradictory or incomprehensible.
3. The Perfect Island that exists in both the reality and understanding is greater than the Perfect Island that only exists in the understanding.
    a. Something that exists in both the reality and understanding is greater than something that exists only in the understanding.
4. Therefore, by contradiction, the Perfect Island must necessarily exist in both the understanding and reality.

In response to Gaunilo's objection of the "Perfect Island", Anselm states that Gaunilo had not fully understood his argument presented in the *Proslogion,* namely his second ontological argument that utilizes the necessary existence of the being than which there is no greater exists. Anselm states that the proof of God differs from the proof of any nonexistent thing because only the existence of God be proven through the superiority of existence over conception (the first argument), as well as the necessary predicate of necessary existence. Since no nonexistent thing could be said to have the predicate of necessary existence (rather, by a priori, the nonexistent thing would have the predicate of unnecessary existence), Anselm argues that the ontological proof can't be applied to any nonexistent thing.

Of course, Gaunilo's objection did not solely consist of his famous "Perfect Island" argument, and his arguments, while dismissed or sidestepped by Anselm, did raise fundamental questions and concerns about the ontological proof that would come to be more explicitly articulated by later philosophers.

One notable objection of Gaunilo was, once again, of a concern of the persuasiveness of the proof, which later comes to be one of the central points of Aquinas's objection as well. He states that the argument can't convince a "fool" to become believers unless "it is established that this being is such that it cannot be had in thought in the same way that any false or doubtful things can" (Hyman 173). In other words, the logic of the argument can't prove the very premise that it is reliant upon. Furthermore, the question calls into question of the connection between the conceivability of the concept with the logical correctness (of necessity or possibility) of the concept. In response to these fundamental questions of logic, Anselm understandably sidesteps the question - appealing to the faith of Gaunilo, stating "I appeal to your own faith and conscience as the most compelling argument [that the premise is not false]" (Book pg. 176).

Another question of Gaunilo that would be addressed later was the question of whether comprehending a concept requires that the concept necessarily exists. Indeed, Gaunilo asks if "understanding" a thing or concept is necessarily "comprehending in genuine knowledge the fact it actually exists". Answering his own question, Gaunilo states that he believes that this idea is not true, using the example of an art piece that only exists as a concept in the mind of the artist, and uses it to argue that understanding an object, or to think of an object that of its predicates do not contradict, can't be lead to an a priori that the object exists - an idea is later affirmed and elaborated by Kant. But as for Anselm, the response to this question is trivial - like the argument of "Perfect Island", the necessary existence of God does not so originate from the existence being a predicate, but from the necessary existence being a predicate.

However, all these discussions of predicates are relevant and usable by the ontological argument if and only if these predicates could be derived solely from the concept of something than which there is no greater exists (which I will abbreviate as STWTINGE from now). So here is where Anselm's seemingly theological derivation of God's characteristic from the concept of STWTINGE begins to come into significance in terms of the ontological argument (and it will be even more relevant in the later objections). Especially, it is in the implicit premises of the derivation in which greatest threats to the ontological argument lies.

First assumption is that there exist qualities in the world that have "degrees" of greatness (i.e. something could be greater than some other thing) and an "intrinsic maximum" (Encyclopedia) of greatness for those qualities, as the only concepts that Anselm relies on for the derivation were the concept of goodness and supremeness.[1] Second, that God as STWTINGE, can (logically) and do have all of such qualities. Lastly, that among these qualities there is the quality of existence (for the first argument) or necessary existence (for the second argument).

Given the irrelevance and difficulty of proving the first assumption for some general list of qualities, let us consider if the existence or necessary existence are qualities that can have a degree of greatness and have an intrinsic maximum.

First, whether existence is such quality or predicate, Kant's famous argument that existence is not a predicate takes a surprisingly similar form to the argument that Gaunilo posed in his objection. While Kant states that existence may be a 'logical predicate', it is not a 'real' predicate, as it does not add any meaning to the thing it is applied to (Sobel 76). Denying that existence is not even a logical predicate may be too extreme, since concepts like Santa Claus that 'exists' only in the mind arguably have predicates like popularity (Sobel 88). As for necessary existence, it intuitively adds meaning onto the subject, and thus lacks any refutation of whether it is a predicate or not.

Thus, despite Kant's objection, one would possibly be able to use existence as a predicate - but without its role as a perfection (a quality that has consistent degrees of greatness and intrinsic maximum), its role in the proof becomes meaningless, and perhaps, by extension, necessary existence as well. With Kant's predicate argument, Philosopher Norman Malcolm argues that existence is not a perfection, as our moral intuition can't comprehend the notion of existent thing

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[1] There also exists an implicit assumption of that assumption, which is that our moral intuition are correct or objective tools to derive whether something is better or worse. But this assumption belongs in the footnote, as it is the implicit assumption of much of philosophy.

being better than some non-existent thing (Anselm). If shown to be valid, Malcolm's argument would not only demonstrate the non-predicate nature of existence, but also further make the case that even necessary existence is not a perfection. After all, how could necessary existence be a predicate if the concept of existence is demonstrably not a perfection? To these objections, Anselm would not have had a response ready, as he did not care to make the assumptions about existence being a predicate and a perfection explicit - which suggests that Anselm might have held such qualities to be self-evident.

Another objection to Anselm's ontological argument involves another premise of the argument - the premise that holds that we can understand STWTINGE. As defined by Anselm and argued for using our intuitive notion that understanding must only involve truths, understanding a concept entails that there be no apparent contradictions between the qualities assigned and inherent to the concept.

Aquinas, however, argues in his criticism of the ontological argument that understanding of an infinite concept and being - namely God and his supreme greatness - is impossible, even if the condition above for understanding is met. Aquinas states that we necessarily simplify the infinite qualities of God to the similar, finite qualities to accommodate for our finite capacity for understanding, and thus we can't ascertain a true understanding of God through those qualities. Regarding this issue of infinite God and finite understanding, Anselm states his position in his response to Gaunilo's objection, arguing that understanding the entirety of the quality is not necessary to tell if the quality is coherent, just as one would not "gaze directly upon the purest light of the sun [to] see the light of day" (Hyman 177).

Another objection that pertains to the understanding premise is the objection that states that the concept of STWTINGE is incomprehensible and contradictory, or at least unprovable to be not contradictory. As with the definition of understanding above, if a concept is said to be contradictory, that would mean that there exists one or more contradiction between the qualities assigned or inherent to the concept. And as Anselm has inferred in *Proslogion*, the qualities of

STWTINGE are the elements of the set of all existing perfections. Within such set, if there exist any two or more contradictory qualities, then the concept of supreme goodness, and by extension, STWTINGE is contradictory and can't exist in the understanding, invalidating the ontological arguments.

There are many objections that argue that the concept of supreme goodness is contradictory, among which we will choose one of the most prominent objections - particularly the objection that uses qualities of perfectly merciful and perfectly just. The argument for contradiction between the two should be obvious - how could a being be both perfectly just, which requires the being to give each one own his due, and also be perfectly merciful, which arguably requires that the being does not give each one not his due, but give necessarily less than what he is due? In response, Anselm states that God is both perfectly just and perfectly merciful by being just to the wicked that He plans to save through his mercy (Hyman 166). Anselm's justification, however, does not resolve the issue of possible contradiction completely. After all, such justification leads to an inquiry of why God does not plan to save all the wicked through the mercy, leading to a possible contradiction with the quality of perfect love. One could even reason how God's intervention is compatible with his previous decision of granting free will, which may cause a contradiction with God's omniscience, and so on.

Not only do the countless[2] possible contradictions within the finite set of perfections make it not physically feasible to prove the consistency within all the perfections, but as long as there exist indefinitely many perfections, we can't logically conclude that the set of all perfections is non-contradictory. How could the latter statement be true? First of all, it is evident through our intuitions that there can not an intrinsic maximum number of perfections (as perfections are derived from our subjective moral intuitions). Then, given that there will always be a possible perfection that we have not tested for, we can't conclude that the set of all perfections is consistent just because the perfections we have tested have been shown to be consistent. In other words, we can't demonstrate the consistency of a perfection by demonstrating the consistency of

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[2] Well, not exactly countless - the number of possible contradictions that needs to be investigated will be about $n(n-1)/2$ for each perfection n

other perfections, even if there is a countless number of them - a problem that is often referred to as the problem of induction (Vickers). This problem would not have been a concern of Anselm, as Anselm would have simply defined all the perfections to be perfections that were indicated in the bible or consistent with it; and as indicated in *Proslogion,* Anselm does have a finite (and quite short) set of perfections. However, Anselm's specific list of perfections can not completely dismiss the possibility of that set having some other perfection, and thus the problem of induction still remains. And so, proving the consistency of supreme goodness appears to be an impossible task, and therefore the understanding premise of Anselm's ontological argument is a conditional premise at best.

Lastly, there remains the objection Hume presented against the ontological argument. Hume's objection interestingly differ substantially from the first two objections, as the objection addresses the logic of the argument rather than the implicit premises that the ontological argument required. Specifically, Hume objected to the statement that have indicated that the contradiction between the STWTINGE that exist in reality and understanding and STWTINGE that only exists in the understanding do not lead to the conclusion that STWTINGE must exist in both reality and understanding, but rather lead to the conclusion that "there is not a being than which nothing greater can be conceived that does not exist in reality", thus arguing that argument can't affirm the existence of God (Sobel 98). In response, Anselm would have argued with the following statements:

1) The concept of STWTINGE itself is conceivable, or understandable.
2) Thus, the STWTINGE exists in the understanding.
3) STWTINGE that exists in both understanding and reality is greater than STWINGE that exists only in understanding.
4) It is conceivable that STWTINGE should exist in reality.
5) Thus, STWTINGE would exist in reality.
   a) Something that is conceivable should be able to exist in reality.

6) Thus, the contradiction in the ontological argument could not lead to the conclusion that 'there is not a being than which nothing greater can be conceived that does not exist in reality'.

As for Hume, he would not be able to refute this chain of reasoning without rejecting the premise that something that is conceivable could also possibly exist in reality - which is commonly held to be the maxim for metaphysics (Sobel 99). Thus, it appears that the approach taken by the first two objections to the ontological argument - rejecting the premises - is, at least, easier than the attempt to disprove the ontological argument through metaphysics.

However, it is not to say Hume's objection has been fruitless - as with the other objections, Hume's objection has revealed interesting philosophical questions and concerns, such as the question of the relationship between something that is conceivable and something that exists in reality. Other objections, too, had been equally beneficial in raising these kinds of philosophical issues, regardless of their attempt to disprove the ontological argument. In their attempts to disprove the argument, philosophers had elaborated upon the role of premises in the argument, the meaning of what it means to be a quality of goodness, and the fundamental limits of induction. With their combined efforts, they had revealed that the ontological argument is not as infallible as it seems at the first glance and indeed demonstrated the fundamental role of philosophy in the matter of truth - to rigorously ascertain to the truth that had once appeared to be unconquerable.

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