

**Phi 260: History of Philosophy I**  
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### **Anselm's Ontological Argument for the Existence of God**

Anselm's argument is an *a priori* argument; that is, it is an argument that is independent of experience and based solely on concepts and logical relations, like a mathematical proof. The form of the argument is that of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Such an argument works like this:

Suppose P.  
If P, then Q.  
But Q is absurd (i.e. implies a contradiction).  
Therefore, P is false (or not the case).

Anselm begins with a stipulative definition of "God" as "a being than which no greater being can be conceived."

The argument of *Proslogion* (Ch. II):

- (1) God exists in the understanding but not in reality. (Supposition)
- (2) Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone. (Premise)
- (3) God's existence in reality is conceivable. (Premise)
- (4) If God did exist in reality, then he would be greater than he is (from (1) and (2)).
- (5) It is conceivable that there be a being greater than God is (from (3) and (4)).
- (6) It is conceivable that there be a being greater than the being than which nothing greater can be conceived ((5), by the definition of "God").

But surely

- (7) It is false that it is conceivable that there be a being greater than the being than which none greater can be conceived.

Since (6) and (7) contradict each other, we may conclude that

- (8) It is false that God exists in the understanding but not in reality.

Thus, if God exists in the understanding, he also exists in reality. Since even the fool (or rational atheist) will allow that God exists in the understanding, God exists in reality. From the definition of God as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived," it follows by logical necessity that God exists.

What does Anselm mean in (2)? Two interpretations:

- (2\*) If **A** has every property **B** has and **A** exists and **B** does not, then **A** is greater than **B**.
- (2\*\*) For any worlds **W** and **W'** and object **x**, if **x** exists in **W** and **x** does not exist in **W'**, then the greatness of **x** in **W** exceeds the greatness of **x** in **W'**.

In other words, it seems to be the case that Anselm takes *existence* to be a property of an object that makes it great. Is this right?

Anselm's second argument (*Proslogion* (Ch. III)) is also tricky. It seems to have the following form:

- (1) Suppose that God – again understood as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” – does not exist. (Supposition)
- (2) Now, it is possible to conceive of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist. (Premise)
- (3) This being is greater than a being that can be conceived not to exist. (Premise)
- (4) If that, than which nothing greater can be conceived (i.e. God) can be conceived not to exist, then it is not that, than which nothing greater can be conceived (from (3)).
- (5) But this is a contradiction.
- (6) Therefore, God exists and is a being that cannot be conceived not to exist.

What does Anselm mean by (2) and (3)? First, if  $x$  cannot be conceived not to exist, then  $x$ 's existence is said to be *necessary*. To say that  $x$  is necessary (or that its existence is necessary) is to say that  $x$  exists in every possible world. Second, to say that  $x$  can be conceived not to exist is to say that there is a world,  $W$ , in which  $x$  does not exist. So now we have the following:

- (2\*) It is possible to conceive of a being that exists in every possible world.
- (3\*) A being that exists in every possible world is greater than a being that does not exist in every possible world.

Another way to put the conclusion is that *God's existence is necessary*.

Note that this argument does not rule out that we will end up with more than one necessary being. But, given Anselm's definition of God, we know that God is greater than any other necessary being.

The traditional criticism of this argument is found in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/87). Kant argues that “existence is not a predicate” and so cannot make something greater than it would be if it did not exist. “Being is obviously not a real predicate, i.e., a concept of something that could add to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing or of certain determinations in themselves. In the logical use it is merely the copula of a judgment.”

Mini-bibliography:

I wrote this up a while ago. As I recall, I used the web page of Gideon Rosen (Princeton) on this argument, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, and various works of David Lewis, Robert Adams, and Alvin Plantinga.