

Saint Anselm

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<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/anselm/#ArgPro>

2.3 The argument of the *Proslogion*

Looking back on the sixty-five chapters of complicated argument in the *Monologion*, Anselm found himself wishing for a simpler way to establish all the conclusions he wanted to prove. As he tells us in the preface to the *Proslogion*, he wanted to find a single argument that needed nothing but itself alone for proof, that would by itself be enough to show that God really exists; that he is the supreme good, who depends on nothing else, but on whom all things depend for their being and for their well-being; and whatever we believe about the divine nature. (*P*, preface)

That “single argument” is the one that appears in chapter 2 of the *Proslogion*. (We owe the curiously unhelpful name “ontological argument” to Kant. The medievals simply called it “Anselm's” argument [*ratio Anselmi*].)

The proper way to state Anselm's argument is a matter of dispute, and any detailed statement of the argument will beg interpretative questions. But on a fairly neutral or consensus reading of the argument (which I shall go on to reject), Anselm's argument goes like this. God is “that than which nothing greater can be thought”; in other words, he is a being so great, so full of metaphysical oomph, that one cannot so much as conceive of a being who would be greater than God. The Psalmist, however, tells us that “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’ ” (Psalm 14:1; 53:1). Is it possible to convince the fool that he is wrong? It is. All we need is the characterization of God as “that than which nothing greater can be thought.” The fool does at least understand that definition. But whatever is understood exists in the understanding, just as the plan of a painting he has yet to execute already exists in the understanding of the painter. So that than which nothing greater can be thought exists in the understanding. But if it exists in the understanding, it must also exist in reality. For it is greater to exist in reality than to exist merely in the understanding. Therefore, if that than which nothing greater can be thought existed only in the understanding, it would be possible to think of something greater than it (namely, that same being existing in reality as well). It follows, then, that if that than which nothing greater can be thought existed only in the understanding, it would not be that than which nothing greater can be thought; and that, obviously, is a contradiction. So that than which nothing greater can be thought must exist in reality, not merely in the understanding.

Versions of this argument have been defended and criticized by a succession of philosophers from Anselm's time through the present day (see [ontological arguments](#)). Our concern here is with Anselm's own version, the criticism he encountered, and his response to that criticism. A monk named Gaunilo wrote a “Reply on Behalf of the Fool,” contending that Anselm's argument

gave the Psalmist's fool no good reason at all to believe that that than which nothing greater can be thought exists in reality. Gaunilo's most famous objection is an argument intended to be exactly parallel to Anselm's that generates an obviously absurd conclusion. Gaunilo proposes that instead of "that than which nothing greater can be thought" we consider "that island than which no greater can be thought." We understand what that expression means, so (following Anselm's reasoning) the greatest conceivable island exists in our understanding. But (again following Anselm's reasoning) that island must exist in reality as well; for if it did not, we could imagine a greater island—namely, one that existed in reality—and the greatest conceivable island would not be the greatest conceivable island after all. Surely, though, it is absurd to suppose that the greatest conceivable island actually exists in reality. Gaunilo concludes that Anselm's reasoning is fallacious.

Gaunilo's counterargument is so ingenious that it stands out as by far the most devastating criticism in his catalogue of Anselm's errors. Not surprisingly, then, interpreters have read Anselm's reply to Gaunilo primarily in order to find his rejoinder to the Lost Island argument. Sympathetic interpreters (such as Klima 2000) have offered ways for Anselm to respond, but at least one commentator (Wolterstorff 1993) argues that Anselm offers no such rejoinder, precisely because he knew Gaunilo's criticism was unanswerable but could not bring himself to admit that fact.

A more careful look at Anselm's reply to Gaunilo, however, shows that Anselm offered no rejoinder to the Lost Island argument because he rejected Gaunilo's interpretation of the original argument of the *Proslogion*. Gaunilo had understood the argument in the way I stated it above. Anselm understood it quite differently. In particular, Anselm insists that the original argument did not rely on any general principle to the effect that a thing is greater when it exists in reality than when it exists only in the understanding. And since that is the principle that does the mischief in Gaunilo's counterargument, Anselm sees no need to respond to the Lost Island argument in particular.

Correctly understood, Anselm says, the argument of the *Proslogion* can be summarized as follows:

1. That than which nothing greater can be thought can be thought.
2. If that than which nothing greater can be thought can be thought, it exists in reality.

Therefore,

3. That than which nothing greater can be thought exists in reality.

Anselm defends (1) by showing how we can form a conception of that than which nothing greater can be thought on the basis of our experience and understanding of those things than which a greater *can* be thought. For example,

it is clear to every reasonable mind that by raising our thoughts from lesser goods to greater goods, we are quite capable of forming an idea of that than which a greater cannot be thought on the basis of that than which a greater can be thought. Who, for example, is unable to think . . .

that if something that has a beginning and end is good, then something that has a beginning but never ceases to exist is much better? And that just as the latter is better than the former, so something that has neither beginning nor end is better still, even if it is always moving from the past through the present into the future? And that something that in no way needs or is compelled to change or move is far better even than that, whether any such thing exists in reality or not? Can such a thing not be thought? Can anything greater than this be thought? Or rather, is not this an example of forming an idea of that than which a greater cannot be thought on the basis of those things than which a greater can be thought? So there is in fact a way to form an idea of that than which a greater cannot be thought. (Anselm's Reply to Gaunilo 8)

Once we have formed this idea of that than which nothing greater can be thought, Anselm says, we can see that such a being has features that cannot belong to a possible but non-existent object — or, in other words, that (2) is true. For example, a being that is capable of non-existence is less great than a being that exists necessarily. If that than which nothing greater can be thought does not exist, it is obviously capable of non-existence; and if it is capable of non-existence, then even if it were to exist, it would not be that than which nothing greater can be thought after all. So if that than which nothing greater can be thought can be thought — that is, if it is a possible being — it actually exists. (This reading of the argument of the *Proslogion* is developed at length in Williams and Visser 2009, chapter 5.)

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