

LeMans and *Proslogion* 15

Stephen Harrop

ABSTRACT. Kearns 2021 argues that there is a parody version of Anselm’s ontological argument (a “gontological argument”) which shows that God does not exist. I show that Anselm considers one of the key premises in Kearns’ gontological argument, and explicitly gives an argument which entails its falsity, and hence the unsoundness of the supposed parody argument.

1. Introduction

It is an exciting time for medieval philosophy. Recent archival research done by Stephen Kearns (Kearns 2021) at the site of the Librarium Babelii (first discovered by J. L. Borges in 1941; for a detailed report see Borges 1984b) has uncovered the long-lost autograph of *Drosslogion*, the important work by medieval philosopher LeMans which formed the basis for Anselm’s parody so-called “ontological argument”. Kearns’ reconstruction of the argument from the original Pig-Latin is meticulously done. In this paper, I hope to offer evidence that Anselm, in the same work that he offers his parody argument, gives a direct reply to hers. Rather than offering *merely* a parody, he additionally offers an argument which directly entails the unsoundness of hers.

2. LeMans’ Argument

Kearns’ reconstruction of the original argument runs as follows:

- (L1) It is possible to conceive of a being greater than all actual things.
- (L2) Suppose: A being than which no greater can be conceived actually exists.
- (L3) If a being than which no greater can be conceived actually exists and it is possible to conceive of a being greater than all actual things, then it is possible to conceive of a being

19 greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived – namely, a being greater
20 than all actual things.

21 (L4) It is not possible to conceive of a being greater than a being than which no greater can be
22 conceived.

23 (L5) (Hence) A being than which no greater can be conceived does not actually exist. (Reduc-
24 tion of 2, from 1–4.) (Kearns 2021, 448; I have relabeled the premises but otherwise changed
25 nothing else)

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27 Some liberties have been taken with the original text. For instance, while classical Pig-Latin
28 has no articles, definite or otherwise, medieval Pig-Latin does. That being said, the argument is, I
29 believe, a faithful reconstruction of the original. Kearns notes, of LeMans’ argument, that “it is un-
30 clear how one might rationally support [Anselm’s] argument without also advocating [LeMans’].”
31 (452)

32 I want to argue, however, that it *is* clear how Anselm can rationally support his argument with-
33 out supporting LeMans’. Specifically, I will present evidence that Anselm indirectly considers (L1)
34 – the premise that it is possible to conceive of a being greater than all actual things – and rejects it
35 as the result of an argument.

36

3. *Proslogion* 15

37 Anselm offers his parody of LeMans’ argument in *Proslogion* 2. The relevant portion is:

38 Now we believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought.

39 Or can it be that a thing of such a nature does not exist, since ‘the Fool has said in
40 his heart, there is no God’ [Ps. 13:1; 52:1]? But surely, when this same Fool hears
41 what I am speaking about, namely, ‘something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-
42 be-thought’, he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his
43 mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists. For it is one thing
44 for an object to exist in the mind, and another thing to understand that an object
45 actually exists...And surely that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot

46 exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind, it can be thought to
 47 exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-
 48 bethought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-
 49 be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-can-be thought. But this is obviously im-
 50 possible. (Anselm 1998b, 87–8)

51 Most people stop reading there. But it is important to note that Anselm goes on to give an
 52 elaboration of several of the points addressed in that section later on in the work. Most importantly
 53 for our purposes, he writes the following, in *Proslogion* 15 (translation my own, from Anselm 1946-
 54 1961, v. 1, p. 112):

55 Hence, Lord, not only are you that greater than which is unable to be thought,
 56 but you are something greater than *can be thought* [*cogitari possit*, emphasis mine].
 57 For since something of this kind [i.e., something greater than can be thought] *can*
 58 *be thought to be* [*valet cogitari esse*, emphasis mine], if you are not this thing itself,
 59 something greater than you is able to be thought [*potest cogitari*, emphasis mine],
 60 which is unable to happen.

61 Let us reconstruct this, somewhat charitably, as follows:

62

- 63 (A1) God is some-being-greater-than-which-cannot-be-thought-of (an S). (premise)
 64 (A2) It is possible to think *that there is* some being greater than can be thought-of. (premise)
 65 (A3) If an S can be thought-of, then it is possible to thought *that there is* some being greater
 66 than that S. (from (A2))
 67 (A4) It is not possible to think *that there is* some being greater than an S. (premise)
 68 (A5) An S cannot be thought-of. (from (A3) and (A4))
 69 (A6) God cannot be thought-of. (from (A1) and (A5))

70

71 The turning point of my reconstruction of Anselm’s argument is that thinking-that-there-is
 72 and thinking-of are importantly different. This is my way, in English, of rendering the difference
 73 between *cogitari* and *cogitari esse* (literally, “to be thought” and “to be though to be”). The first

74 is, roughly, to conceive of that entity, to entertain its concept, without any particular existential
75 commitment. The second is to endorse a proposition concerning the existence of some entity.¹

76 This distinction is important, because it helps Anselm avoid apparent paradox. For without
77 this distinction, he would be stuck arguing that we may think-of a being that is greater than ev-
78 ery being we can think-of (which we should note is almost exactly (L₄) from LeMans' argument
79 unnegated). That would be a pretty puzzle indeed, and perhaps enough to sink the project of the
80 *Proslogion*. But no such apparent antinomy is involved here. Anselm may reason nicely about such
81 a being by thinking *that there is* such a being, rather than thinking-*of* it.²

82 Not every proposition that one can take a thinking-that-there-is attitude towards, according to
83 Anselm, necessarily corresponds to some being, state of affairs, or other entity that one can take a
84 thinking-of attitude towards. This the point of (A₄). And note that, if this argument is successful,
85 *any* S will not be able to be thought-of. If the argument is sound, then, one is forced to reject (L₁) in
86 LeMans' argument, since anything greater-than-which-cannot-be-thought is also something that
87 cannot be thought-of.

88 Note, finally, that Kearns distinguishes two senses of (L₁). First, there is the sense where it
89 asserts that, for every actual thing, we may think-of something greater than that thing. Second,
90 there is the *intended* sense, that it is possible to think-of something greater than any actual thing.
91 Let's rephrase (L₁) slightly to match this:

92 (L₁') It is possible to think-of a being such that, for every actual being α , that being
93 is greater than α

94 And this, of course, is what Anselm denies with the conclusion of his argument. It holds, recall,
95 for any S. So no S may be thought-of, actual or otherwise.

1. My use of "think" and its cognates rather than "conceive" and its does not reflect any thick philosophical difference, only a slavish desire to stick to the surface meaning of the Latin.

2. A reader for the journal points out (correctly I think) that to make greater headway on this problem, one should look to *Monologion* 65, wherein Anselm himself asks how, though it is ineffable how God is a Trinity and yet One, we may nonetheless reason about such a being. This chapter makes crucial use of a distinction in some ways similar to the one I make: "This line of reasoning, therefore, allows our conclusions about the supreme nature to be true and the supreme nature itself to remain ineffable. We understand them to be indicating the supreme nature by means of something else, rather than expressing it by means of what is proper to its essence." (Anselm 1998a, 71) One does not think-of God's essence, but uses a workaround.

96 There is a somewhat subtle point here. It is perhaps natural to give the argument about the
 97 following gloss: Anselm's putative response is that, if God is an S, and God is actual, then it is not
 98 possible to think-of an S. And this gloss bears a structural similarity to a response which supposes
 99 that something actual is a thing such that nothing greater than it can be thought-of. And that –
 100 one might think – is obviously no good as an objection. So, just as accomplices share in the crime
 101 of the criminal, so does Anselm's reply share in the futility of the second response.

102 But this, above, is *not* Anselm's response. Rather, it is that any S you like, anything such that
 103 nothing greater than it can be thought-of, cannot itself be thought-of. Here is how we see this.
 104 Almost by definition, S must be the thing in question greater than all actual things, since if it wasn't,
 105 we could think-of a greater thing. But of course, as Anselm thinks he has just shown, it is not
 106 possible to think-of S *at all*. Hence, it is not possible to think-of a thing greater than all actual
 107 things. That is, (L1') is false. And we reach the conclusion that it is false without assuming anything
 108 about the *actuality* of the S in question, and hence about God. The entire argument is existence-
 109 neutral. No question-begging, no apparent paradox, and no requirement to conceive that there
 110 exists a being greater than any actual being – it appears Anselm thought of it all!³

111 4. Concluding Remarks

112 My point here is not to argue that Anselm's argument in response to that of LeMans' is sound,
 113 even though all three premises are varying degrees of plausible. (A1) seems true by definition on
 114 the classical conception of God. (A2) appears at least minimally plausible; no contradiction is
 115 obviously involved in the relevant conception. (A4) is probably the most vulnerable, as it posits a
 116 substantive and perhaps non-trivial connection between thinking-that-there-is and thinking-of.⁴

117 But I have not set out here to defend Anselm's parody's *soundness*. Instead, what I have tried
 118 to show is that Anselm explicitly endorses a proposition which entails the falsity of (L1), and hence
 119 entails that LeMans' argument is unsound – and he even gives an argument for it. Nor have I set
 120 out to defend the ontological argument. There may be something else quite wrong with it, or there
 121 may not. My argument does not touch that. Nor have I argued that the argument from *Proslogion*

3. Please pardon the pun.

4. To give a fully worked-out account of just what a theory incorporating such a connection would look like is far beyond the scope of the present task. Nonetheless, that is what Anselm appears to be after.

122 15 entails any controversial existence claims by itself. Coupled with Anselm's general ontological
123 argument, yes, it does. But that does not touch the analysis in §3.

124 Instead, what I have argued is this. Not only does Anselm plausibly reject (L1) in the same work
125 that he offers the ontological argument, he gives a concrete reason as to *why* he does. Namely, he
126 argues that any S must also be a being that cannot be thought-of, and since any being greater than
127 all actual beings must be an S, a being greater than all actual beings can't be thought-of.

128 Maybe Anselm's argument works, and maybe it doesn't. Further inquiry is required. But even
129 if it doesn't, his argument is no mere parody of LeMans', for he explicitly rejects one of the key
130 premises of her argument. Hence, it is free from the problems which afflict an argument which
131 has a relevantly similar parody.

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