

LeMans and Proslogion 15

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It is an exciting time for medieval philosophy. Recent archival research done by [Stephen Kearns \(2021\)](#) at the site of the Librarium Babelii (first discovered by J. L. Borges in 1941; for a detailed report see [Borges 1984](#)) 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 LeMans's. Rather than offering merely a parody, he additionally offers an argument which directly entails the unsoundness of LeMans's.

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 greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived – namely, a being greater than all actual things.
- (L4) It is not possible to conceive of a being greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived.
- (L5) (Hence) A being than which no greater can be conceived does not actually exist. (*Reductio* of L2, from L1–L4.) ([Kearns 2021](#): 448; I have relabelled the premisses but otherwise changed nothing else)

Some liberties have been taken with the original text. For instance, while classical Pig-Latin has no articles, definite or otherwise, medieval Pig-Latin does. That being said, the argument is, I believe, a faithful reconstruction of the original. Kearns notes, of LeMans's argument, that 'it is unclear how one might rationally support [Anselm's] argument without also advocating [LeMans's]' ([Kearns 2021](#): 452).

I want to argue, however, that it *is* clear how Anselm can rationally support his argument without supporting LeMans's. Specifically, I will present evidence that Anselm indirectly considers L1 – the premiss that it is possible to conceive of a being greater than all actual things – and rejects it as the result of an argument.

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

Now we believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought. Or can it be that a thing of such a nature does not exist, since ‘the Fool has said in his heart, there is no God’ [Ps. 13:1; 52:1]? But surely, when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about, namely, ‘something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought’, he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists. For it is one thing for an object to exist in the mind, and another thing to understand that an object actually exists ... And surely that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-can-be-thought. But this is obviously impossible. (Anselm 1998: 87–88)

Most people stop reading there. But it is important to note that Anselm goes on to give an elaboration of several of the points addressed in that section later on in the work. Most importantly for our purposes, he writes the following, in *Proslogion* 15:

Hence, Lord, not only are you that greater than which is unable to be thought, but you are something greater than *can be thought* [*cogitari possit*, emphasis mine]. For since something of this kind [i.e. something greater than can be thought] *can be thought to be* [*valet cogitari esse*, emphasis mine], if you are not this thing itself, something greater than you is able to be thought [*potest cogitari*, emphasis mine], which is unable to happen. (translation my own, from Anselm 1946, v. 1: 112)

Let us reconstruct this, somewhat charitably, as follows:

- (A1) God is some-being-greater-than-which-cannot-be-thought-of (an *S*). (Premiss)
- (A2) It is possible to think *that there is* some being greater than can be thought-of. (Premiss)
- (A3) If an *S* can be thought-of, then it is possible to think *that there is* some being greater than that *S*. (From A2)
- (A4) It is not possible to think *that there is* some being greater than an *S*. (Premiss)
- (A5) An *S* cannot be thought-of. (From A3 and A4)
- (A6) God cannot be thought-of. (From A1 and A5)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There is a somewhat subtle point here. It is perhaps natural to give the argument the following gloss: Anselm's putative response is that, if God is an *S*, and God is actual, then it is not possible to think-of an *S*. And this gloss

- 1 My use of 'think' and its cognates rather than 'conceive' and its cognates 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 1998: 71)

One does not think-of God's essence, but uses a workaround.

bears a structural similarity to a response which supposes that some actual thing is also a thing such that nothing greater than it can be thought-of. And that – one might think – is obviously no good as an objection. So, just as accomplices share in the crime of the criminal, so does Anselm's reply share in the futility of the second response.

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

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

But I have not set out here to defend Anselm's parody's soundness. Instead, what I have tried to show is that Anselm explicitly endorses a proposition which entails the falsity of L1, and hence entails that LeMans's argument is unsound – and he even gives an argument for it. Nor have I set out to defend the ontological argument. There may be something else quite wrong with it, or there may not. My argument does not touch that. Nor have I argued that the argument from *Proslogion* 15 entails any controversial existence claims by itself. Coupled with Anselm's general ontological argument, yes, it does. But that does not touch the analysis in §3.

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

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.

Maybe Anselm's argument works and maybe it does not. Further inquiry is required. But even if it does not, his argument is no mere parody of LeMans's, for he explicitly rejects one of the key premisses of her argument. Hence, it is free from the problems which afflict an argument which has a relevantly similar parody.⁵

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5 Thanks to two anonymous readers for the journal for their excellent and constructive feedback.