

## **St. Anselm's Ontological Argument for the Existence of God**

Rex Jasper V. Jumawan

Fr. Dexter Veloso

### **Introduction**

Have you ever sought God? Do you have any idea of God? Do you believe that God exist? Throughout the history of philosophy, a lot of intellectual attempt were vigorously fashioned in order to prove the existence of God and its nature through the very definition and concept of God. St. Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, made a fair share in the long list of proofs for proving the existence of God. He made an argument wherein it completely relies on one's understanding of God to prove its actual existence; this is popularly known as the *Ontological Argument*.

Among all the proofs for the existence of God, none is more enigmatic than the Ontological Argument of St. Anselm. Originally formulated over nine hundred years ago, it has always been a subject of endless discussion. Some have regarded the Ontological Argument as "the best example of purely *a priori* proof, unfolding as it does without any reference whatsoever to the world of sense-experience" (Miller 1972, *God and Reason*, 95).

In this paper, the essential features of the Ontological Argument according to the concept of St. Anselm of Canterbury will be presented. This will give us the explanation how we can prove God's existence through the use of reason alone. This paper will also present the earliest objection to the argument given by a contemporary of St. Anselm.

### **St. Anselm's Arguments**

St. Anselm, in his *Proslogion*, unknowingly formulated what appear to be two arguments. It was not clear to him that the first argument he laid down was completely different from the

second argument, for he had seen it merely as an elaboration of the first one. “However, most philosophers today think that he stumbled on a completely different, and perhaps, stronger line of reasoning” (Lawhead 2007, *The Voyage of Discovery*, 176). The two arguments begin with the same initial premises but takes a different direction as it goes further. The first argument “purports to prove, simply from the concept of God as the supreme being, that God’s existence cannot rationally be doubted by anyone having such a concept of Him.” (Taylor 1965, Introduction to *The Ontological Argument*, vii). The second argument “makes the stronger claim that God exists necessarily, or in other words, God possesses a kind of existence that is possessed by no other thing” (Taylor 1965, ix).

### **The First Argument**

St. Anselm strongly affirms that God “is that than which nothing greater can be thought, or more simply, God is the greatest conceivable being” (Stumpf and Fieser 2008, *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond*, 140-141). As he begins the argument, he refers to Psalms 14:1 wherein he mentioned the fool who had said that there is no God. For St. Anselm, he meant of the fool as a person who denies the existence of God, or simply, an atheist. Accordingly, when an atheist denies the existence of God, he obviously knew nothing of what he/she is saying, and thus he/she is called a fool. “For when the fool hears the words ‘greatest conceivable being’, he understands what he hears, and what he understands can be said to be in his understanding” (Stumpf and Fieser 2008, 141). It is one thing for something to exist only in the mind, and another thing for something to exist outside of the mind.

The first argument goes like this: I have an idea of God. This idea of God is the idea of a being that is the greatest that can be conceived. A being is greater if it exists in reality than if it exists only in the understanding alone. If God, who is the greatest conceivable being, exists in

the understanding alone, then a greater being that exists in reality can be conceived. But this is a contradiction. It is absurd to conceive of a being which is greater than the greatest conceivable being.

Therefore, if I have an idea of the greatest conceivable being then such being must exist both in the understanding and in reality. And so, “God (the being than which nothing greater can be conceived) must then exist in reality, not merely, as an idea of the mind, for if he existed in the mind only, he would not be God” (Miller 1972, 26).

By this way of thinking, “anyone who denies the existence of God is denying the existence of a being that must exist in order to be the very thing that he/she is talking about” (Miller 1972, 27). It is like saying that God—a being whose existence is necessary—does not exist.

### **The Second Argument**

“God cannot be conceived not to exist... That which can be conceived not to exist is not God” (Deane 1962, *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, 8). The second argument focuses on the property of necessary existence. This version of the proof argues that “necessary existence must be attributed to a being that is perfect to the maximum degree” (Lawhead 2007, 176).

Now the argument goes likely to this effect: I have an idea of God. This idea of God is the idea of a being that is the greatest that can be conceived. A being whose nonexistence is impossible is greater than a being whose nonexistence is possible. Now, if the greatest possible being’s nonexistence is rationally conceivable, then it will not be the greatest possible being. But this a contradiction. And so, the nonexistence of the greatest possible being cannot be rationally conceived. Therefore, God necessarily exists.

God, the greatest possible being, is the one whose existence does not depend on anything else. This implies that God “cannot begin to exist and cease to exist” (Lawhead 2007, 9) and also, God does not just happen to exist but exists necessarily. Therefore, God exists and “thou canst not be conceived not to exist; and rightly. For if a mind could conceive of a being better than thee, the creature would rise above the Creator; and this is most absurd” (Deane 1962, 9).

### **St. Anselm and Gaunilo**

A certain monk named Gaunilo raised some objections to the ontological argument. Though Gaunilo was, of course, a believer, he was convinced that St. Anselm’s argument was unsound and he felt the need to answer St. Anselm for the sake of intellectual honesty. “Gaunilo’s observations deserve special consideration because they anticipate most of the objections subsequently raised” (Bonansea 1979, *God & Atheism*, 115). Accordingly, it also offers an opportunity to clarify some points in the argument.

Gaunilo’s objections may be summarized as follows. “The notion of a being than which no greater can be conceived is not different from the notion of a fictional being or a being whose existence has not been ascertained” (Bonansea 1979, 115). Let us say for example: There is an island somewhere, which, ”because of the difficulty, or rather the impossibility of discovering what does not exist, is called the lost island” (Deane 1962, 150). However, it does not follow that the island in question is existing despite the fact that we can form a clear concept of it. As a matter of fact, the island has never existed in reality but in the mind only. The point of this criticism is that St. Anselm’s argument would let us “rationally prove the actual existence of a wide variety of things, as long as we can imagine that they are the greatest possible member of their species” (Lawhead 2007, 177). Briefly, Gaunilo wants to say that “existence is not

something that can be inferred from a mere concept in the mind, whether it is the concept of God or of any other being” (Lawhead 2007, 177).

Concerning the greatest possible island, it was easy for St. Anselm to dismiss Gaunilo’s analogy. The analogy simply did not apply to his own reasoning. Firstly, there can be no such thing as an island which is the greatest possible island ever, since no matter how excellent the island may be, it is always possible to think of a better one. Secondly, an island , “by its very nature, is limited and only relatively perfect, whereas St. Anselm’s greatest possible being possesses all perfections to the ultimate degree” (Bonansea 1979, 117). Thirdly, an island, like any other creature, is a contingent being. In other words, one can think of Gaunilo’s island “nonexisting without any contradiction, which is the opposite of St. Anselm’s idea of the greatest possible being” (Miller 1972, 30).

## **Conclusion**

Although many do not think that the argument is very convincing, philosophers have not been able to lay the argument to rest. As a testimony to the great genius of this monk, his argument is still debated today using the sophisticated techniques of the twentieth-century logic.

After St. Anselm, the ontological argument continued to have admirers and critics throughout the history of philosophy. Philosophers who were more oriented toward experience, such as Aquinas and Ockham among the medieval thinkers, and Kant in the eighteenth century, harshly criticized the argument even though they took the side of theism.

Indeed, there can be no doubt that St. Anselm approached the problem of God’s existence from the point of view of a believer who tries to understand the meaning of his own belief. St. Anselm’s faith shows that it truly precedes all understanding for it only understands what it seeks, primarily because it believes.

## References

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