

Gaunilo's *Cogito* Argument

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Gaunilo presents Anselm with a dilemma in section 7 of his Responsio: I know most certainly that I exist. But If I cannot think my non-existence at the same time, then Anselm's claim in Proslogion 3 (that my inability to think God's non-existence, while knowing most certainly that He exists, is a unique property of God) would be false. If I can do so, however, then I should also be able to know most certainly that God exists and, at the same time, think his non-existence. I will show that Anselm's response to Gaunilo's attack is not adequate because it does not address the issue of certainty, which is at the heart of Gaunilo's objection.

Not much is known about Gaunilo, a contemporary of Saint Anselm, except that he was a Benedictine monk at Marmoutier, near Tours. Gaunilo's fame rests on his criticism¹ of the *argumentum Anselmi*, as the ontological argument was known in the middle ages. But Gaunilo's criticism is routinely reduced to the 'most excellent island' analogy. The remainder of his text is often ignored. Mackie, for example, does not think there is much merit in Gaunilo's objections: 'Some of his criticisms are obscure and perhaps confused.'² And for another commentator Gaunilo is 'a second-rate philosopher'.³

This neglect of the *Liber pro insipiente* is regrettable, because there is much insight in Gaunilo's objections. Some of the subsequent criticisms of the ontological argument, by Aquinas for example, had been put forward by Gaunilo.⁴ Anselm himself thought that his debate with Gaunilo was so important that he insisted it be added whenever the *Proslogion* was to be copied.

In this paper I want to focus on one of Gaunilo's objections which has been mostly overlooked by the commentators⁵: Gaunilo's *cogito* argument (as I shall call it). Even Anselm

¹ 'Gaunilo pro insipiente'. The English translations are mine—although I have benefited from existing translations and for which I am grateful. References to the Latin text are to Jasper Hopkins, *A New, Interpretive Translation of St. Anselm's Monologion and Proslogion*, (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Benning Press, 1986) p. 264–275.

² J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) p. 53.

³ D.A. Gregory, "On Behalf of the Second-Rate Philosopher: A Defense of the Gaunilo Strategy Against the Ontological Argument," in *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1984, pp. 49–60.

⁴ Two objections from section 2 in Gaunilo are also put forward by Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*: "But the opposite of the proposition 'God is' can be mentally admitted: 'The fool said in his heart, There is no God'. Therefore, that God exists is not self-evident." (*Summa Theologica*, I,2,1) And secondly: "Yet, granted that everyone understands that by this name God is signified something than which nothing greater can be thought, nevertheless, it does not therefore follow that he understands that what the name signifies exists actually; but only that it exists mentally." (*Summa Theologica*, I 2.1 ad2). Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Second and Revised Edition, 1920, Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.

⁵ A notable exception is Thomas Losoncy. Losoncy discusses Gaunilo's attack which is located in section 7 of the *Liber pro insipiente*. But he focuses on how Gaunilo misinterprets Anselm on 'being'. According to Losoncy, Gaunilo ignores that God's being is different from the being of all other things (*contingentia*). However, Gaunilo is writing on behalf of the fool, who has not (yet) accepted that there is this fundamental difference. The fool (Gaunilo) needs to be convinced first. I will point out below that Anselm's Platonic metaphysics is not something the fool must accept. Thomas Losoncy, "Anselm's response to Gaunilo's Dilemma. An insight into

himself does not address the thrust of this particular objection. It occurs in section 7 of Gaunilo's objections and is aimed at *Proslogion* 3⁶.

Gaunilo's *cogito* argument is his most devastating attack on the reasoning in *Proslogion* 3. Gaunilo presents two lines of attack, both of which would destroy the argument of *Proslogion* 3. And both positions are mutually exclusive. For this reason Gaunilo does not need to commit himself to either position—he presents Anselm with a dilemma. First Gaunilo discusses his ability to think his own non-existence:

I know most certainly that I exist; but I know nonetheless that I am able not to exist⁷. Moreover, I understand without any doubt that the Supreme Being, which is God, both exists and cannot not exist. However, I do not know whether, during the time when I know most certainly that I exist, I could think that I do not exist. But if I can do this, why can I not think the non-existence of whatever else I know [to exist] with the same certainty?⁸

In this objection Gaunilo accepts Anselm's premise that the Supreme being exists in his understanding and cannot not exist. Let us now take a closer look at Gaunilo's *cogito* argument and make it explicit:

- 1) I am most certain [*certissime*] I exist (this is the highest degree of certainty possible—Gaunilo's *cogito*).
- 2) In spite of [1] there is no logical contradiction in knowing 'that I am able not to exist'. (Gaunilo must refer here to the time before birth and after death.⁹)
- 3) But I am not sure whether I can think my own non-existence (i.e. now—not in the past or future as in [2]), while at the same time being aware—with the highest degree of certainty—of my existence.¹⁰
- 4) If I could think my own non-existence as described in [3], then I could also think the non-existence of everything else which I know with the same certainty—i.e. God's non-existence.

the notion of 'Being' operative in the *Proslogion*", in *The New Scholasticism*, Vol. 56, No. 207, 1982, p. 207–216.

⁶ For this discussion it is not important whether one subscribes to the view that Anselm presented one or two proofs in the *Proslogion*. There are certainly two separate arguments (*Proslogion* 2 and *Proslogion* 3), and Gaunilo is here concerned with the argument in *Proslogion* 3.

⁷ Note that Jasper Hopkin's translation, which is excellent in many respects, is misleading with regard to this clause: "yet, I also know no less certainly that [I] am able not to exist." *Nihilo minus* should not be translated as "with the same certainty" but rather as "nonetheless". Gaunilo section 7, p. 275.

⁸ *Et me quoque esse certissime scio, sed et posse non esse nihilominus scio. Summum vero illud quod est, scilicet deus, et esse et non esse non posse, indubitanter intelligo. Cogitare autem me non esse, quamdiu esse certissime scio, nescio utrum possim. Sed si possum, cur non et quidquid aliud eadem certitudine scio?* Gaunilo section 7, p. 274.

⁹ See also T. Losoncy, "The Anselm-Gaunilo Dispute about Man's Knowledge of God's Existence: An Examination" in *25 Years of Anselm Studies (1969–1994): Review and Critique of Recent Scholarly Views*, ed. Frederick van Fleteren and Joseph C. Schnaubelt (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), pp. 161–181, p. 168.

¹⁰ Note that this is not a flouting of the law of non-contradiction, because self-awareness is an intuition and thinking my own non-existence belongs to the realm of discursive thought. The law of non-contradiction applies to the latter only. Consequently, Anselm does not accuse Gaunilo of having committed a logical blunder but instead counters the attack by distinguishing between *scire* and *cogitare*.

5) Therefore, *Proslogion* 3 would be false.

Step [4] needs a little more explanation. The certainty Gaunilo encounters in [1] cannot be exceeded by the certainty of God's existence.¹¹ Gaunilo does not elaborate on this but presumably this is so because—just like the Cartesian *cogito*—the certainty of Gaunilo's *cogito* is constitutive of all certainty. The certainty of self-awareness in thought is the condition of the possibility of all subsequent certainty in thought (in this case: Anselm's argument). Without an initial or foundational certainty there cannot be any subsequent certainties. Thus Gaunilo's *cogito* is a first-order type certainty—it is an intuition. Whereas the certainty in Anselm's formula is not constitutive but only a second-order type certainty—it belongs to the realm of discursive thought. For this reason the latter cannot exceed the former.¹²

It follows that whatever holds for Gaunilo's *cogito* must also hold for knowing that God exists, because the certainty of the latter does not exceed the certainty of the former. At best, it can only be equal to it.

The argument in *Proslogion* 3 presupposes that there is 'certainty as such'. And 'certainty as such' is not something we arrive at through any thought process (e.g. through the argument in *Proslogion* 3, which can only claim certainty with regard to the argument itself). Rather, 'certainty as such' is presupposed by any discursive thinking. It would seem plausible to place the origin of 'certainty as such' in something which differs in origin from the (logical) operations of the mind (i.e. thought processes) which rely on it, in order to avoid circularity. One could interpret Gaunilo's *cogito* argument in this way and argue that for Gaunilo the origin of 'certainty as such' is an intuition: his *cogito*. 'Certainty as such' stems from this intuition.

It may be objected, however, that there is no textual basis for such an interpretation. Gaunilo does not distinguish between an intuition and discursive thinking, neither does he elaborate on degrees of certainty.

A more cautious reading of Gaunilo's argument must nevertheless focus on Gaunilo's assumptions about certainty. If knowing God's existence were more certain than knowing one's own existence, the argument would not work.¹³ Because any conclusions about the *cogito* would not hold for God's existence. Thus, Gaunilo must assume that the certainty of

¹¹ The certainty of God's existence is the subject of *Proslogion* 2.

¹² Losoncy comes to similar conclusions: "I am as certain of my own being as I can ever be about anything's being. (...) God's nonbeing is thinkable since I cannot be more certain about God's being than I am about my present being." (Losoncy, 1982, p. 209). Losoncy goes even further in a later paper. There he interprets Gaunilo as saying that the certainty about our own existence is "an existence about which we are more certain than about any other existence including God's". T. Losoncy, p. 167. Gregory Schufreider, in his illuminating study of Anselm, does realise that Gaunilo presents an argument which relies on the *cogito*, but he interprets the indubitability of one's own existence as "a strictly factual matter", no different from understanding that things exist in the world. G. Schufreider, *Confessions of a Rational Mystic: Anselm's Early Writings*, (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994), p. 151.

¹³ There is also a logical problem. Certainty about the existence of God must be imbedded in a *cogito*, it must be thought/performed by a self. If this self were not certain about its own existence, it would be hard to see how it could claim to have certainty about God's existence.

his *cogito* must either exceed or be equal to the certainty of knowing God's existence. Only then can the conclusions about the former be applied to the latter.

Now, what do these considerations on certainty mean for Gaunilo's argument? If it turns out that I can think my own non-existence and 'know most certainly that I exist', then this should also be the case for God. I could know (most) certainly that He exists and think His non-existence at the same time. Thus, the first horn of the dilemma would prove Anselm wrong.

Gaunilo then considers the other horn of the dilemma which kicks in at step [4]: 'But if I cannot do this [think my own non-existence], then this [property of not being able to be thought not to exist] would no longer be a unique characteristic of God.'¹⁴ Then every thinking being could not conceive of itself as not existing.

Let us look at this version of the argument in detail¹⁵:

- 1) I am most certain [*certissime*] I exist (this is the highest degree of certainty possible—*cogito*).
- 2) In spite of [1] there is no logical contradiction in knowing 'that I am able not to exist'. (Gaunilo must refer here to the time before birth and after death.)
- 3) But I am not sure whether I can think my own non-existence (i.e. now—not in the past or future as in [2]), while at the same time being aware—with the highest degree of certainty—of my existence.
- 4) If I could not think my own non-existence as described in [3], then the property of not being able to be thought not to exist is not unique to God.
- 5) Therefore, the uniqueness claim in *Proslogion* 3 would be false.

In both instances (whether I can or cannot think of myself as not existing) the reasoning of *Proslogion* 3 is shown to be false according to Gaunilo.

Anselm replies to Gaunilo's attack in section 4 of his *Responsio*: 'Know then, that you can think your non-existence while knowing most certainly that you exist. I am surprised that you claimed not to know this'.¹⁶

Here Anselm points out that what can be known (*scire*) can conflict with what can be thought (*cogitare*). A person knows that he is alive (now), but can nevertheless conceive of his death. Anselm's distinction between *scire* and *cogitare* indicates that he recognises that these are two separate faculties of thought. Anselm's point is that Gaunilo knows that he exists, but he can nevertheless think his own non-existence because he is also aware that he is a contingent being. And one cannot apply this kind of thinking to the Supreme Being. All things which are understood to exist can be thought not to exist because they are *contingentia*.

¹⁴ Gaunilo section 7: p. 275. *Si autem non possum, non erit iam istud proprium deo.* (p. 274).

¹⁵ Steps [1], [2] and [3] are identical to the first version of the argument.

¹⁶ *Scito igitur, quia potes cogitare te non esse, quamdiu esse certissime scis! Quod te miror dixisse nescire.* *Responsio Anselmi*, section 4. p. 286/288.

Indeed, all those things, and those alone, can be thought not to exist, which have a beginning or an end or a composition of parts: and also, as I have already said, whatever at any place or at any time does not exist as a whole. But that being alone, cannot be thought not to exist, in which thought finds neither a beginning nor an end nor a composition of parts, and which it finds always and everywhere as a whole.¹⁷

The faculty of thinking (*cogitare*) relies on the imagination; and the concept of God cannot be imagined (*fingere*) not to exist. Unlike *contingentia*, it does not lend itself to such an operation. 'For many things which we know to exist we think as not existing, and many things which we know not to exist we think as existing; not by making a judgement, but by imagining they are as we think them to be.'¹⁸

Thus Anselm believes that he has countered both horns of the dilemma by showing that one is true (but without admitting Gaunilo's conclusion in step [4]), and therefore the other is false. Gaunilo can think his own non-existence while knowing most certainly that he exists (i.e. step [4]), but this does not apply to the concept of God. And the possibility of not being able to think one's non-existence (i.e. step [4']) is, therefore, excluded.

Anselm's defence is based on the contingent nature of humans and the non-contingent nature of God. However, Anselm only shows that one cannot think God's non-existence and at the same time know most certainly that God exists. Anselm does not prove his claim that Gaunilo can think his non-existence and at the same time be maximally certain that he exists (*cogito*). Anselm only asserts that this is so. It is obvious to Gaunilo that he can perform these acts of thought sequentially (i.e. step [2]). But it is not certain whether he can perform these two acts of thought simultaneously.

Gaunilo may have realised that performing two modes of thought (the intuition of the *cogito* and thinking one's non-existence—or *scire* and *cogitare* in Anselm's language) simultaneously may be possible, but there would be a difficulty in being aware of doing so. Because, we would have to introduce another, higher, level of consciousness, which 'observes' all other conscious acts while they are being performed. This would constitute a third act of thought (i.e. consciousness of consciousness *uno actu*), which would be directed at the other two. Gaunilo may have realised that the last (i.e. third) operation is elusive, because consciousness of consciousness can only ever be had in reflection, which is always retrospective, never simultaneous. Reflection would only provide second-order-type certainty. But since reflection, by its nature, must always lag behind that which is being reflected upon, it can never provide first-order-type certainty. We therefore lack certainty about the possibility or impossibility of performing these two acts together. Gaunilo does not pretend to be uncertain about this; he genuinely does not know.

¹⁷ *Illa quippe omnia et sola possunt cogitari non esse, quae initium aut finem aut partium habent coniunctionem, et, sicut iam dixi, quidquid alicubi aut aliquando totum non est. Illud vero solum non potest cogitari non esse, in quo nec initium nec finem nec partium coniunctionem et quod non nisi semper et ubique totum ulla invenit cogitatio. Responsio Anselmi, section 4: p. 286.*

¹⁸ *Multa namque cogitamus non esse quae scimus esse, et multa esse quae non esse scimus; non existimando, sed fingendo ita esse ut cogitamus. Responsio Anselmi, section 4: p. 288/289.*

The crux of Gaunilo's argument is the lack of certainty in [3]. If Gaunilo is not certain (i.e. second-order type certainty) whether he can or cannot think his own non-existence while knowing most certainly (i.e. first-order type certainty) that he exists, then it would follow that Anselm cannot claim certainty about the impossibility of thinking God's non-existence in *Proslogion* 3. The certainty of one's own existence (Gaunilo's *cogito*) is the *conditio sine qua non* of all other (i.e. second order) certainties.

Gaunilo cannot pronounce (with second-order type certainty) on [3], although the content of [3] is directly related to the intuition of the *cogito*. If any second-order type certainty were to be had, it should pertain to [3]. All other thought processes which are not directly related to an intuition (e.g. Gaunilo's *cogito*), must also lack maximal certainty, because they rely on—are derived from—second-order type certainty, rather than on an intuition like the *cogito*.

But perhaps there is more to Anselm's defence than we first thought. Gaunilo lacks certainty about step [3] because he refers to synthetic propositions. Anselm, on the other hand, presents an analytic truth in *Proslogion* 3 ('God cannot be thought not to exist.').¹⁹ This truth explicates what is meant by 'something than which nothing greater can be thought'. It is as certain as the statement: 'A triangle cannot be thought not to have three sides. Thus, Anselm's defence against Gaunilo merely illustrates the certainty of analytic truths. Anselm's reply to Gaunilo's *cogito* argument follows this pattern: 'But that being alone, cannot be thought not to exist, in which thought finds neither a beginning nor an end nor a composition of parts, and which it finds always and everywhere as a whole.'²⁰ By definition God cannot be thought not to exist.

We could concede that the certainty that unpacking an analytic proposition gives may be equal to the certainty of an intuition.²¹ But analytic propositions do not bridge the gap between the logical and the ontological spheres. They do not tell us whether the concept under discussion is instantiated.²² Anselm's certainty is not a first-order type certainty (e.g. the certainty pertaining to the *cogito*) which could bridge the gap between the logical and the ontological. It is a certainty which springs from having defined something in a particular way.

The result is that Anselm fails to bridge the gap from the logical to the ontological sphere. However, this is not a philosophical blunder on his part. Rather, Anselm does not think it necessary to bridge this gap, because he assumes a (neo-)Platonic metaphysics.²³ But

¹⁹ And in *Proslogion* 2 the analytic truth is 'God must exist in reality as well'.

²⁰ *Illud vero solum non potest cogitari non esse, in quo nec initium nec finem nec partium coniunctionem et quod non nisi semper et ubique totum ulla invenit cogitatio. Responsio Anselmi*, section 4: p. 286.

²¹ Kant speaks of the 'necessity' of analytic propositions. See I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by N. Kemp-Smith (Boston: Bedford Books, 1965): B11–12.

²² The fascination of the ontological argument is that we have a concept, which, when unpacked, includes existential claims: by definition God exists and cannot be thought not to exist. This is a unique feature among analytic propositions. But this may have something to do with the fact that it refers to a non-contingent being, rather than to contingent things like triangles and dragons.

²³ See Anselm's Platonic proofs for the existence of God in the *Monologion*. It is interesting to compare how Descartes bridges this gap. He does not do so through the trademark proof in the 3rd Meditation—because the proofs of the 3rd and 5th Meditation are both still in the realm of discursive thinking—but Descartes links the logical to the ontological through an intuition (the *cogito*).

he must not assume that the fool is a Platonist too. This is the meaning of Gaunilo's most excellent island example: The fool is not a Platonist.

There is only one way Anselm could attain first-order type certainty for the existence of God. It would have to come from an intuition (which, for a believer, would be a religious experience). And Anselm indicates in *Proslogion* 1 that the formula 'something than which nothing greater can be thought' was revealed to him. This is also reflected in the original title of the *Proslogion*: *fides querens intellectum*. But getting the fool to accept this religious intuition would be outside the scope of the ontological proof. The fool might accept the *cogito* (certainty about his own existence), but nothing else.

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