

ANSELM'S EQUIVOCATION

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Abstract: Although most agree that St. Anselm's ontological argument is problematic, there is no consensus as to what, exactly, is the flaw in the argument. In this essay, I propose what I take to be a novel criticism of the argument. Specifically, I claim that Anselm is guilty of an equivocation in his use of the word "God," using it sometimes to refer to a being and sometimes to refer to a concept. Any attempt to remove this equivocation, I show, is doomed to failure; it is impossible to render the argument (or some version thereof) sound.

1. INTRODUCTION

St. Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God has been much discussed for centuries in philosophical and theological circles.¹ Notoriously, although most agree that the argument is problematic, there is no consensus as to what, exactly, is the flaw in the argument—it has been variously taken to be invalid, unsound, unpersuasive, and question-begging. In this essay, I propose what I take to be a novel criticism of the argument,² which makes it clear not only that the argument is not sound, but that it cannot be, for deep and important reasons.

In particular, as I shall argue, Anselm is guilty of an equivocation in his references to "God," which he sometimes takes to be a being and sometimes a concept. This equivocation, I shall demonstrate, renders the ontological argument invalid; further, this is fatal to Anselm's effort—once this equivocation is exposed, we shall also see that the argument is beyond repair.

2. THE ARGUMENT

The following is a plausible reconstruction of Anselm's argument.³ This is my own reconstruction of the argument; I should note that the argument

has been reconstructed in a number of different ways in the literature. However, my objection does not turn on my particular reconstruction; any construal of the argument that stays more-or-less true to Anselm's intended argument is subject to the objection I shall raise here.

The argument can be stated as resting upon three premises:

- (1) God is the being⁴ than which nothing greater can be conceived.⁵
- (2) God exists in the understanding.
- (3) It is greater to exist in reality than to exist merely in the understanding.

The conclusion, namely that God exists, is derived from these premises via a *reductio ad absurdum*:

- (4) Assume, for *reductio*, that God does not exist in reality, but merely exists in the understanding.
- (5) Then, we can conceive of a being which does exist in reality, but which otherwise is identical with God.
- (6) This being is greater than God [from 3].
- (7) But this yields a contradiction [from 1,6].
- (8) God exists.

3. STANDARD OBJECTIONS TO ANSELM'S ARGUMENT

Various objections have been leveled against this argument.⁶ One form of criticism is to challenge a particular premise. For instance, it has been suggested that the definition stated in the first premise somehow begs the question, insofar as the notion of existence is built into the definition. This objection is often due to a misconstrual of Anselm's argument, however: the premises are sometimes presented as claiming that God is the most perfect being and that existence is a perfection. While this would indeed be question-begging, it does not seem to accurately characterize Anselm's argument.

Against the second premise, some have argued that God doesn't exist in the understanding. This sort of objection could turn on the finite limits of the human mind, coupled with the infinite nature of God, and thus of the concept of God. Alternatively, it might be argued that the concept of God is incoherent; that is, that the properties attributed to God are contradictory. And Kant has famously argued that existence is not a predicate, and this has spawned a great deal of argument as to whether this is so, and if it is whether the argument can be repaired.⁷

It has also been objected, against the third premise, that the notion of greatness appealed to by Anselm is ill-defined. Indeed, in the *Proslogium*, Anselm doesn't tell us what greatness is meant to consist in; it is left to the reader to try to determine such from context, but there is little help to be found in the surrounding text.⁸ As suggested above, greatness cannot be identified with perfection, lest Anselm be guilty of circular reasoning. It is also unclear what the relation is meant to be between greatness and moral goodness. In their interesting "An Ontological Argument for the Devil,"

David and Marjorie Haight argue that if the ontological argument is sound, then a parallel argument proves the existence of the being than which no *worse* can be conceived.⁹

Their argument requires that, just as it is greater for an all-good being to exist in reality than not, it is greater for an all-evil being to exist in reality than not.¹⁰ So, we might wonder whether it is greater for Hitler or diseases to have existed or not, or whether it is greater for, say, mud to exist than not. Of course, this raises the question of whether greatness is meant to be indexed to the being in question, such that it would be greater *for that being* if it were to exist; or to the universe as a whole, such that it would be greater *all things considered* for that being to exist.

I think that this line of objection might be avoided, by the way, by restricting the scope of the third premise. While it is stated as a universal claim—that is, it states that it is better for anything to exist in reality than merely in the understanding—this is stronger than is required for Anselm's purposes. For, we are able to deduce many of God's characteristics from the definition given in premise (1): God is omnipotent, omniscient, (perhaps) omnibenevolent, and so forth. So, premise (3) only need claim that it is greater for *this* kind of being—indeed, for this particular being—to exist in reality than merely to exist in the understanding. While this seems promising, it nonetheless faces an important problem: it is unclear how to restate the third premise accordingly. For, surely, (3g)¹¹ It is greater for the being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist in reality than merely to exist in the understanding seems suspicious; it seems dangerously close to begging the question. It is unclear to me whether this premise is any more fallacious than its universal counterpart; in any case, such is the topic of another discussion.

Of course, defenses of Anselm against each of these objections have been offered, and that there seems no consensus as to whether the argument is sound. More importantly, there seems to be no consensus as to the source of its unsoundness if it is indeed unsound. Accordingly, in what follows, I shall ignore these familiar lines of objection, as they fail to illuminate the real flaw in Anselm's argument. That is, if I am right, then it does not matter what Anselm meant by greatness, nor does it matter how he has defined God; it does not matter whether existence is a predicate, or whether the concept of god is coherent or humanly conceivable. The argument is more deeply flawed than any of these objections indicates.

Rather than attacking a particular premise of the argument, I shall attempt to show that the argument is invalid; that is, that its conclusion does not (and, indeed, cannot, given the basic structure of the argument) follow deductively from its premises. This is also a familiar line of objection; indeed, Anselm considers an objection of this sort, viz. Gaunilo's "perfect island" argument.¹² Gaunilo suggests that we consider the notion of the perfect island, the island than which no greater can be conceived. Then, by employing an argument with the same form as Anselm's argument, we can demonstrate the existence of said island; further, this argument is valid if

and only if the ontological argument is, by virtue of their sharing the same form. But, Gaunilo concludes, the perfect island does not, as we know, exist, so neither argument can be valid.

However, even if we were to agree that Gaunilo's objection succeeds in showing that Anselm's argument is invalid, we would still be left to wonder *why* it is invalid. That is, it is unclear what the formal problem with the ontological argument itself is, and observing only that a parallel argument is invalid does not shed much light on the matter.¹³ My objection, though, in virtue of its attack on the form of Anselm's argument, will make manifest why the argument is invalid. That is, I intend not merely to maintain *that* the argument is invalid, but also to reveal the source of its invalidity.

4. CONCEPTS, DEFINITIONS AND EXISTENCE

What, then, is the real flaw in Anselm's argument? Many have objected, upon a first glance at the argument, that it has to be unsound: for, they insist, the fact that I have a concept of something doesn't entail that it exists. We have concepts of many things, including many non-existent things; indeed, if we maintain, as seems plausible, that conceivability tracks logical possibility, then this is just to claim that there are possible things which are non-existent. And surely this is right. But Anselm was surely aware of this, and would not have maintained that we can have a sound ontological argument for the existence of anything whatever. Rather—as seems appropriate—God is supposed to have a unique ontological status, such that God's existence, but not the existence of anything else, can be deduced a priori. Consider Anselm's response to Gaunilo: "Now I promise confidently that if any man shall devise anything existing either in reality or in concept alone except that than which a greater cannot be conceived to which he can adapt the sequence of my reasoning, I will discover that thing, and will give him his lost island, not to be lost again."¹⁴ So, this objection is too hasty—we need to examine the particular concept in question to see whether it entails existence.

Alternatively, the objection might maintain that Anselm is attempting to "define God into existence." It is unclear, though, why this should be objectionable. For, we can know that certain things do not, and cannot, exist simply in virtue of their definitions; consider, for instance, round squares.¹⁵ By parity of reasoning, then, one might think that we can know that certain things do, and must, exist simply in virtue of their definitions.¹⁶ So, we cannot just reject the ontological argument on the general grounds that it attempts to proceed from a definition to an existence-claim; we must attend more carefully to the details of the argument itself.

Or so it seems. In fact, I think that this line of objection begins to get at the real flaw in Anselm's argument. That is, it is right to claim that the fact that we have a concept of something does not entail its existence. However, this is not, as is traditionally argued, because the domain of conceivability outstrips the domain of existence, so that there are conceivable but non-existent entities. Rather, it is because concepts and beings are different in

kind. Similarly, existence in the understanding and existence in reality are incommensurable. Thus, it is impossible, in principle, for the ontological argument to be sound. Let me elaborate.

5. ANSELM'S EQUIVOCATION

My approach in this section is to produce what I take to be the best construal of each of the premises of the ontological argument, with the above-mentioned considerations in mind. Then, I shall argue that the amended version of the argument is invalid. Therefore, I shall conclude, Anselm's argument cannot have both true premises and a deductive relation between premises and conclusion; that is, the argument is unsound.

Let us more carefully examine Anselm's argument, then, beginning with the first premise, which presents the definition of God:

(1) God is the being than which nothing greater can be conceived.

We want to be careful to avoid begging the question by assuming that God exists, as God's existence is what is to be proven. So, this premise must be modified somewhat.¹⁷ I suggested at the end of the previous section that concepts and beings are different in kind, so we want to be careful not to confuse the two in the course of this argument. And, properly speaking, this premise concerns our *concept* of God. Indeed, in the opening paragraph of Chapter II of the *Proslogium*, Anselm draws a distinction between the two:

And so, Lord, do thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as thou knowest to be profitable, to understand that *thou art as we believe*. . . . And, indeed, we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived [emphasis added].

That is, we can distinguish between God's existence ("that thou art . . .") and our concept of God "we believe that thou art . . ."). And the definition of God is construed by Anselm in terms of what we believe; that is, he is in fact discussing our concept of God rather than God the being.¹⁸ So, properly speaking, the premise should be stated in terms of our concept of God rather than in terms of God the being.

Unfortunately, though, Anselm is guilty of committing an equivocation here. For, immediately after he introduces the distinction between our concept of God and God the being, he blurs that distinction, seemingly identifying the two. The above passage is elliptical; let me now produce the unexpurgated passage:

And so, Lord, do thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as thou knowest to be profitable, to understand that thou art as we believe; *and that thou art that which we believe*. And, indeed, we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived [emphasis added].

In the passage which fills the earlier ellipsis, Anselm seems to be identifying our concept of God with God the being. And this is the equivocation that ultimately renders his argument unsound. We must distinguish between concepts

and beings, as I have already suggested, and Anselm seems to fail to do so.¹⁹

Let us return, then, to the first premise, and repair it in accord with this observation. I shall call our concept of God “the God-concept.” Then, a more accurate version of the first premise is as follows:

- (1') The God-concept is a concept of a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.

This restated premise avoids begging the question of God’s existence; indeed, it makes no reference at all to the existence of God the being,²⁰ and thus *cannot* beg such a question. And, as stated, it seems unobjectionable; for, we do have such a concept, whether or not we believe that it is instantiated.²¹ If you are unhappy with calling it “the God-concept,” we can rename it as you like. I do not mean to suggest that there is any necessary conceptual connection between this concept and God the being; rather, I am merely attempting to produce what I take to be the most charitable portrayal of Anselm’s argument. That is, I am attempting to render the argument, or some variant of it, sound, if such is possible.

Now that we have seen that the first premise must be restated, let us turn to the second premise:

- (2) God exists in the understanding.

This premise, too, is about the God-concept rather than God the being. Beings do not exist in the understanding; they are external to any particular mind.²² What do exist in the understanding are concepts, as well as ideas, thoughts, and other mental objects. Indeed, this manifestation of Anselm’s equivocation seems particularly egregious. If we do not interpret the locution “*A* exists in the understanding” as merely shorthand for “Some mind contains a concept of *A*” or something equivalent, then it is not clear what it could be supposed to mean.²³

So, let us restate Anselm’s second premise accordingly:

- (2') The God-concept exists in the understanding.

Again, what I am attempting to do here is to restate Anselm’s argument in a way which renders the premises true; I shall soon argue that this interpretation renders the inference invalid.

Finally, let us turn to the third premise. It seems that it also needs to be restated, perhaps as something like the following:

- (3') It is greater for a concept to be instantiated than uninstantiated,

or

- (3'') It is greater for a being to exist than merely for its associated concept²⁴ to exist.

It is unclear that either of these revisions of premise (3) yields a true statement. However, I shall not press that point here. Instead, let us now consider the revised version of the argument as it currently stands, after mak-

ing the necessary revisions to the premises which yield the *reductio*, and then modifying the remainder of the argument in kind:

- (1') The God-concept is a concept of a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.
- (2') The God-concept exists in the understanding.
- (3') It is greater for a concept to be instantiated than uninstantiated.
- (4') Assume, for *reductio*, that the God-concept is uninstantiated.
- (5') Then, there is a concept²⁵ which is instantiated, but which otherwise is identical with the God-concept.
- (6') This concept is greater than²⁶ the God-concept [from (3')].
- (7') But this yields a contradiction [from (1'), (6')].
- (8') God exists.

But (5') is false. For, if two concepts are such that the former is instantiated and the latter is not, then they must be distinct concepts. But if they are distinct concepts, then they must have distinct conceptual content; that is, they cannot be identical in every way except that only one is instantiated. But the only obvious way to repair this deficiency is to beg the question, by maintaining that the concept referred to in (5') includes existence as part of its conceptual content. And, of course, this is not to repair the argument at all. To avoid begging the question in this way, we would want to restate (5') as something like:

- (5'') A concept that is instantiated, but which otherwise is identical with the God-concept, would be greater than the God-concept.

or

- (5''') The God-concept would be greater if it were instantiated.

But this gains us little, if any, argumentative strength. For, now, (7') does not follow from the previous premises; no contradiction results. There is nothing contradictory in claiming that there is a concept greater than the God-concept; while the content of the God-concept is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived, this does not entail that the God-concept itself is a concept than which no greater concept can be conceived. So, the *reductio* does not go through in the revised version of the argument, and the argument is thus seen to be invalid. The conclusion that God exists does not stand in the proper relation to the premises; indeed, this can be seen simply by examining the form of the revised argument.

To summarize: Anselm's argument, as originally presented, contains an equivocation. Attempts to remove this equivocation, and thus produce true premises, renders the argument invalid. So, the argument is not, and cannot be made to be, sound.

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NOTES

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 2001 Pacific Division

meeting of the American Philosophical Association; thanks to Bruce Russell and that audience for their discussion. Thanks also to Tim Bayne, Thony Gillies, Marga Reimer, Dan Russell, and David Schmitz for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

2. This sort of claim is difficult to substantiate, and even more difficult to support via citation. My *modus operandi* has been to carefully survey the most prominent literature on the ontological argument, and to consult with others who are knowledgeable about the relevant literature. To my knowledge, given that research, the objection presented in this essay is original.

I should note that Russell accuses Anselm of an equivocation of sorts (Bruce Russell, "The ontological argument," *Sophia* 24 [1985]: 38–47). However, his accusation differs significantly from my own. In particular, Russell claims that Anselm's use of the phrase "exists in the understanding" is ambiguous, and that it must be interpreted in two different ways in order to render the argument intelligible. Similarly, Lewis accuses Anselm of equivocating on "greatest." Others might suggest that he has equivocated on "exist" (D.K. Lewis, "Anselm and Actuality," *Nous* 4 [1970], 175–188). However, I am not aware of an accusation of this particular equivocation (namely, on "God"), which I argue is the essential flaw in Anselm's argument.

3. Malcolm has argued persuasively that Anselm has offered two distinct ontological arguments, in *Proslogium* II and III, respectively (Norman Malcolm, "Anselm's ontological arguments," *Philosophical Review* 70 [1960]: 56–66). (Indeed, Hartshorne calls the latter "the Anselmian argument par excellence." See Charles Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery: A Re-Examination of the Ontological Proof for God's Existence* [La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1965], 34.) My criticism shall focus on the former version of the argument; however, my criticism will apply equally to the second version.

4. This is not meant to mark any existential commitment; to do so would be explicitly question-begging.

5. There is some question, I suppose, as to whether this definition is a premise of the argument or merely a presupposition. However, since it is explicitly invoked in arriving at Anselm's conclusion, it seems appropriate to list it among the premises.

6. Since the objections discussed in this section are standard and well-known, and since they have been oft-repeated, I won't attempt to give references for each objection. The goal of this section is not to provide a thorough review of the literature, but rather to indicate the wide variety of objections to Anselm's argument that have been offered. In any case, as I shall note at the end of this section and the beginning of the following section, none of these arguments gets to the heart of the problem with the argument, while I maintain that my objection does just this.

7. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman Kemp Smith, trans., (London: Macmillan, 1929).

8. The best I have been able to do is to conclude that Anselm's sense of greatness is an *ontological* sense; of course, though, this is not terribly illuminating. Brecher also glosses "greater" as "ontologically greater" (Robert Brecher, *Anselm's Argument: The Logic of Divine Existence* [Brookfield, VT: Gower, 1985], 59).

9. David and Marjorie Haight, "An ontological argument for the devil," *The Monist* 54 (1970): 218–20. It is noteworthy that, while the Haight's argue from the validity of Anselm's argument to the validity of an argument *for* the existence of the devil, C. K. Grant has argued from the validity of Anselm's argument to the validity of an argument *against* the existence of the devil (C. K. Grant, "The ontological disproof of the devil," *Analysis* 17 [1957], 71–72). This suggests that the logical form of Anselm's argument is not clearly understood. Brecher (*ibid.*, 17, 119n25) traces the history of this debate and the confusions surrounding it.

10. Presumably, the being than which no greater can be conceived would be all-good, and the being than which no worse can be conceived would be all-evil. However, even this is not uncontroversial: it is unclear what the relation is between Anselmian greatness and morality. It is not at all clear to me that it is greater to be

morally good than to be morally evil.

11. The "g" is for "God."

12. See Anselm's "On Behalf of the Fool," in Sidney Deane, trans., *St. Anselm: Basic Writings* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1962).

13. This consideration leads me to believe that, in fact, Gaunilo's argument does not share the form of the ontological argument after all. First, note that the former has a conclusion which is *empirically* known to be false, while the latter is meant to be *a priori*. Additionally, there is an important difference between the *unqualified* notion of a being, and the notion of a particular sort of being; e.g. an island.

14. From Anselm's "Reply to Gaunilo," in Deane, *St. Anselm*. Although Anselm doesn't seem to offer an adequate response to the perfect-island argument, he at least makes it explicit that the argument is meant to be uniquely an argument for God's existence, rather than an argument for the most perfect *X* where *X* is some qualified type of being.

15. This point has generally been overlooked in discussions of this objection to Anselm's argument. However, for a noteworthy exception, see Charles Taylor's "Introduction," in Alvin Plantinga, ed., *The Ontological Argument: From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers* (London: Macmillan, 1968), xv–xvi.

16. I mean "some things" to function merely as an existential quantifier here, for it might be the case that God is the only thing that can be known to exist in virtue of its definition.

17. It is worth noting Plantinga's attempt to avoid this worry in the final chapter of his *God, Freedom and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). Plantinga offers a modal version of the argument, in which he presents the first premise in terms of the property of maximal greatness. However, it seems to me that he nonetheless begs the question, by tacitly positing a being that instantiates said property. See note 21 below.

18. It may be that to discuss a concept *is* to discuss the being so defined, but only in an indirect way. My point is that Anselm is here not talking *directly* about God the being.

19. I should note that some translations of the argument—for example, Gregory Schufreider's (*An Introduction to Anselm's Argument* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978], 88)—do not make this equivocation so stark, and that the original text doesn't seem to obviously lend itself to either an equivocal or an unequivocal rendering of the argument. However, I do not mean to start a debate as to the correct textual interpretation, or the correct translation, of Anselm's argument as presented in the *Proslogium*. Rather, my point is a *conceptual* one: I argue that no sound construal of Anselm's argument can be had. As such, I am not concerned with the actual words Anselm used, but with the content of his argument, and in particular the best construal of that argument.

20. See note 4.

21. One might argue that we do not, in fact, have such a concept. Such an argument would maintain either that the concept is contradictory, and thus we cannot have such a concept; or that it is in some other way beyond the scope of human conceivability. However, I will grant, for the purposes of the current discussion, that we do have such a concept.

22. Setting aside a Berkeleyian idealist line, in which all beings are but ideas in the mind of God. Even on such a line, though, *God* is presumably more than just an idea in the mind of God.

23. Plantinga has offered a modal interpretation of the ontological argument that seems to successfully avoid this equivocation. However, this argument seems to be original to Plantinga (or perhaps, at least partially, to Hartshorne), rather than a modification of Anselm's argument. In any case, Plantinga is only able to avoid the equivocation at the cost of rendering another premise problematic. While there is not space here to offer a thorough criticism of Plantinga's argument, note that his

possible-worlds interpretation seems to force him to beg the question of God's existence, albeit in a more subtle way than those who have leveled this objection against Anselm have argued.

24. Presumably, the notion of "associated concept" could be cashed out in terms of the relation between a definition and the thing defined; I will simply assume that such can be done without great difficulty.

25. That is, we can conceive of such a concept. I take it that it is the same for there to be a concept and for a concept to be conceivable.

26. Just as Anselm's notion of greatness is somewhat vague, it is unclear what makes one concept greater than another. However, since this reconstruction of the argument will be unsound for other reasons, I shall ignore that wrinkle here.