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The Ontological Argument and Objects of Thought

Edward Wierenga
University of Rochester

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Is there anything new to be said about Anselm's Ontological Argument? First formulated in the 11th century, the argument has been the subject of scrutiny ever since. As Alvin Plantinga has noted, "nearly every major philosopher from the time of Anselm to the present has had something to say about it" (1974, 85).[1] Is there really anything that this distinguished tradition has overlooked? Well, as Plantinga goes on to observe, "this argument has had a long and illustrious line of defenders extending to the present," and as M. J. Charlesworth (1979, 7) predicts, "so long … as the enterprise of philosophical theology continues, we may expect to have the *Proslogion* argument still very much with us." Perhaps, then, some of the more recent commentators have found issues about which there is room for further discussion.

As it turns out, recent work by Gareth Matthews and by Matthews and Lynne Baker[2] raise a number of issues deserving of further thought. In this paper, I propose to discuss two of them. One is a question about the context of the argument; the second is their more substantive proposal of a new interpretation.

I. A Prayer

Before we look at the details of Anselm's argument, let us briefly consider its context. Chapter 2 of the *Proslogion* begins with the words, "Therefore, Lord, you who grant understanding to faith, grant that, insofar as you know it is useful for me, I may understand that you exist as we believe you exist, and that you are what we believe you to be," making it explicit that the Ontological Argument that follows is embedded in a prayer to God. Matthews thinks that this is one of the "many intriguing peculiarities" of the argument. He writes, "It is surely paradoxical to be addressing a being whose existence one is trying to establish. It is especially paradoxical to be offering the proof as part of a *petitionary prayer* to that very being" (Matthews, 2005, 82). Matthews acknowledges that there is "no formal contradiction in saying to someone (or *as if* to someone), 'I hereby offer you a proof that you exist,' or even, 'Help me construct a proof that you exist'. But Matthews persists in holding that "such a procedure is extraordinarily odd," and he offers a suggestion as to what exactly is wrong with this technique. He conjectures that this approach calls into question the "sincerity of one's address to God" as well as "the genuineness of the prayer" (2005, 82). Matthews attempts to allay these concerns somewhat by connecting Anselm's petition with Augustine's questions whether someone could call on God without knowing who God is and how to direct one's search to the right being. Matthews moves

from these questions to cite Augustine's motto "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*), which, as Matthews notes, was Anselm's original title for the *Proslogion*, but he does not develop the allusion (2005, 83).

But how exactly does this Augustinian precedent remove the peculiarity of Anselm's prayer? My suggestion is that developing this connection in more detail will enable us to see why Anselm's project is neither peculiar nor paradoxical. A concern with adding understanding to faith is certainly prominent in Augustine's thought, perhaps nowhere more so than in his *On Free Choice of the Will*. Early in that work Augustine affirms that "God will aid us and will make us understand what we believe. This is the course prescribed by the prophet who says, 'Unless you believe you shall not understand'"[3] (Bk I, Ch. 2). Interestingly, Augustine, like Anselm as we shall see below, also invokes the fool who denies God's existence. He does this in a reply to his student, Evodius, who claimed to be certain by faith that God exists, but not by reason (Bk. II, Ch. 2). Augustine then goes on to develop an argument for God's existence, which he summarizes with the claim that "God, that which is more excellent than reason, demonstrably exists," and he concludes that "this indubitable fact we maintain, I think, not only by faith, but also by a sure though tenuous form of reasoning" (Bk. II, Ch. 15).[4]   So on Augustine's view, coming to understand that God exists requires acquiring a chain of reasoning that is a demonstration of the proposition that God exists.[5] Unlike Anselm, Augustine does not *ask* God for help in finding such a demonstration, but he expresses confidence that God *will* help him in that project. It does not seem that he is insincere in this hope nor in expressing his need for God's help. Rather, I think, Augustine's, and thus also Anselm's, search for a demonstration of God's existence is an expression of intense *interest* in God. What they both want to do is know more about God. Anselm's prayer can thus be understood as the request that God help him understand God better, to help him know more about God's nature. If his argument succeeds, what he seeks to understand about God's nature is that it *follows from* that nature that God exists. Seeking this sort of understanding need not minimize the value of faith. Anselm need not think that this demonstration is required for belief in God, and, in any event, having found a demonstration he need not then *base* his belief in God *on* the argument.

II. A New Interpretation of the Argument

A. An Initial Statement of the Argument

Anselm's argument for God's existence, at least in his version and in those formulations that attempt to stay close to his, is a *reductio ad absurdum*.[6] It begins by assuming that God, or that than which nothing greater can be conceived, does

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not exist. It then proceeds to deduce a contradiction from this assumption. As Matthews summarizes it (approvingly), "Whatever the Fool [Anselm's imagined atheist disputant] comes up with to associate with the words he mumbles in his heart ('something than which nothing greater can be conceived'), when he adds that it—that thing he has in mind, whatever it is—is both (a) something than which nothing greater can be conceived, and (b) something that fails to exist in reality, the Fool has, Anselm can insist, contradicted himself" (2005, 97). The real challenge, I believe, is to find something the atheist has in mind but whose non-existence entails a contradiction.

Let us look at a basic formulation of the argument so that we can see where some of the crucial issues lie. Let 'B' be a name whose reference is fixed by the definite description 'the being than which a greater cannot be conceived'. Then assume for *reductio*

> (1) B does not exist.

Next, supply some general principle to capture the idea behind Anselm's claim that "if [a thing] exists solely in the mind . . . , it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater." Perhaps,

> (2) For all *x*, if *x* does not exist, then it conceivable that there is something greater than *x*.

(This premiss does not do justice to Anselm's claim in Pros. 2 that it is *the same* being that could be greater, but we will ignore that detail.) Then deduce

> (3) If B does not exist, then it conceivable that there is something greater than B. (from (2) by universal instantiation),

and

> (4) It is conceivable that there is something greater than B. (From (1) and (3) by *modus ponens*).

Finally, add the premiss suggested by Anselm's retort that "this is obviously impossible", namely,

> (5) It is not conceivable that there is something greater than B.

Since (4) and (5) contradict each other, a contradiction has been deduced from the assumption (1); so that assumption is false.

Many commentators have noted that the inference of (2) from (1) by universal instantiation is legitimate only if B is in the domain of quantification, that is, only if B is among the things we are talking about when we make a claim about

everything. But this is precisely what the argument is designed to establish, so it is hardly fair to assume it in the second step of the argument.[7]

B. *Objects of Thought*

1. Talking about things without presupposing that they exist

In their recent joint work, Baker and Matthews (2010) offer a novel and sophisticated proposal designed to ensure that the defender of the argument and the objector have a neutral way to frame the question. Their idea is to introduce the category of "objects of thought",[8] which are things we think or talk about, whether they exist in reality or not. A benefit of this approach is that that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists at least in thought, as an object of thought, and is available therefore to be talked about.[9] It should thus be possible to avoid the problem identified at the end of the last section, namely, that of presupposing the existence in reality of this being in order to reason from the assumption that it does not exist to the conclusion that it would be greater if it did. Seeing how the appeal to objects of thought avoids this objection requires some exegesis, however.

Baker and Matthews say that objects of thought are "people, places, and things that we talk about, think about, and refer to, even when we wonder whether they exist or not" (34). Except for the final clause, objects of thought might just be ordinary people and things. However, Baker and Matthews add that they also include "mythical beings, fictional characters, hallucinated people, and things thought to exist on the basis of false belief or false testimony" (36, n. 11). According to Baker and Matthews, "it is an empirical fact that we human beings have the ability to think of, speak of, and refer to things whether they exist in reality or not, and even whether the thinker or speaker believes that they exist or not" (34–35).[10] They give as examples the Loch Ness Monster, Johnny Appleseed,[11] and Lady Macbeth.

An important motivation for Baker and Matthews is the idea that people can successfully communicate with each other without sharing a commitment to the real existence of the things they are talking about. Both believers and skeptics can discuss reported sightings of the Loch Ness Monster, for example, and they can discuss its probable dimensions or the depths at which it is most likely to live. More generally, philosophers can argue about the existence of objects of a certain kind and yet understand each other. Sociologists can report the beliefs of their subjects without denying them. In all of these cases, people are able to think and talk about things without assuming that they exist–all they need is agreement "on a definite description to pick out the object of thought whose existence in reality is in dispute" (37).

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2. Two ways of having a property

In addition to things existing in reality or merely in thought, there are, according to Baker and Matthews, two corresponding ways for an object of thought to have a property, namely, *had-in-reality* and *had-in-thought*. Having a property in reality is just the familiar way of having a property. Having a property in thought is being thought about in a certain way, or being thought of as having that property. Pegasus, for example, has many of his salient properties in thought only. He does not have-in-reality the property of being a horse. But he does have some properties in reality, for example, being the subject of many paintings. Having some properties in thought and others in reality is not, however, a defining feature of objects of thought that exist only in thought. For you and I and other really existing things have properties in both ways. We have them in reality if we really have them, and we have them in thought if people think of us as having them.

3. Incomplete sets of properties

Thus, the distinction between objects that exist in reality and objects that exist only in thought is not to be made on the basis of how they have their properties. Rather, objects that exist in thought only have (in thought) an *incomplete* set of properties.[12] They have only the properties that they have been thought to have. Thus, to cite Baker's and Matthews' examples, there is no correct answer to the question of how much Pegasus weighs or on what day of the week Sherlock Holmes was born. Things that exist in reality, on the other hand, have (in reality) a complete set of properties. For any property, an object that exists in reality either has that property or it has the complement of that property.[13]

4. Collaborative construction

It would be nice to know a little more about those objects of thought that do not exist in reality. Baker and Matthews are careful to distinguish their view from Meinongianism.[14] They claim that, in contrast to recent Meinongian proposals, their special objects do not make up their own ontological category, are not automatically generated by any comprehension principle,[15] and depend upon the human ability to talk about things, whether or not they exist. On this last point, Baker and Matthews are surely right: their view is motivated by and rooted in the phenomenon of people talking about things without regard to whether they exist. But their view certainly seems to have an ontological commitment: there are (in thought) people and things that do not exist (in reality). The case of fictional characters is illustrative. As Arthur Conan Doyle wrote more Sherlock

Holmes stories, Holmes *acquired-in-thought* additional properties. Perhaps when Nicholas Meyer wrote further Holmes stories, Holmes *acquired-in-thought* still more properties. If fans of Holmes come to believe that he said, "Elementary, my dear Watson," even though he never utters that phrase in a Conan Doyle work, then Holmes has-in-thought the property of having said that. Formulating a detailed principle here, however, would be a formidable task. One can see why Baker and Matthews did not attempt it. On the one hand, one might think that there should be some limits on under what circumstances someone could add had-in-thought properties to a mere object of thought. It should be possible, for example, for someone to be mistaken about what properties a mere object of thought has in thought. But this could not happen if anyone who thinks of a thing as having a property succeeds in adding that property to the ones the object has in thought. On the other hand, if there are limits, they are presumably generous, since Baker and Matthews recognize that objects of thought can have-in-thought incompatible properties, as apparently happened when Conan Doyle gave different, incompatible locations for Dr. Watson's war wounds.

Baker and Matthews thus endorse a collaborative "construction" of objects of thought. They take postmodernism a step further by providing for the social construction of *un*reality. This approach has an interesting application to the ontological argument. In his earlier paper (2005), Matthews suggests that western religious practice provides evidence that God exists, at least in the understanding:

> One could argue that the history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam provides evidence for supposing that there is a common object of worship in these traditions, a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. If we can provide evidence that there is indeed such a common object of worship, across various languages, and within different cultures, then we have good reason to say that God, not just as a formula or an idea, but as an object of worship, exists at least in the understanding. Having secured this referential peg, we could then follow Anselm's argument ... and prove, it seems, that God does not exist merely in the understanding, but in reality as well.[16]

5. Reference to objects of thought

After making one more introductory point about what objects of thought are supposed to be like, we will be able to turn at last to see how the idea can be applied to the ontological argument. According to Baker and Matthews, our terms *refer* to objects of thought; indeed, we can make *de re* predications about objects of thoughts (2010, 47). But exactly whom or what we refer to depends upon whether the object of thought exists only in the understanding or whether it exists in reality. If it exists in reality, our terms refer to the actual individual

or thing. If there is a giant creature living in the depths of Loch Ness, the term 'the Loch Ness Monster' refers to it; if not, the term refers to a mere object of thought, an object corresponding to a certain incomplete set of properties.

This feature of reference to objects of thought holds for reference to the being than which nothing greater can be thought, as well. Baker and Matthews say that

> In order to disagree, Anselm and the Fool (the atheist) must refer to the same thing (whether or not it exists in reality). That than which nothing greater can be conceived is in both the Fool's and Anselm's understanding by dint of the Fool's and Anselm's talking about and referring to that than which nothing greater can be conceived. If Anselm is right, then the Fool is unwittingly referring to something that exists in reality; if the Fool is right, then Anselm is unwittingly referring to something that exists only in the understanding, and not in reality. (2010, 45)

This idea that the reference of our terms is to the actual object, if there is one, and to a mere object of thought otherwise, will turn out to be important below.[17]

C. *Greatness and Objects of Thought*

We are finally in a position to return to the ontological argument. In order to give an account of comparative greatness that applies to objects that do not exist in reality, Baker and Matthews introduce a technical relation of *being an otherwise exact same thing as*:

> (OES) If *x* exists merely in thought, then any *y* that exists in thought and in reality and has-in-reality all the properties that *x* has-in-thought, is an otherwise exact *same thing* as *x*. (2010, 46)

Recall that a thing that exists only in thought is "incomplete", that is, it has-in-thought a limited number of properties. Pegasus, for example, has-in-thought such properties as *being a horse, having wings, having been ridden by Bellerophon,* etc.[18] Anything that exists in reality and has-in-reality all of these properties is an otherwise exact same thing as Pegasus.

Baker and Matthews use this concept of *being an otherwise exact same thing* as in order to state a principle about greatness:

> (G) For anything *x* that existed only in thought, an otherwise [exact] same thing that existed both in thought and in reality would be greater

(not just greater in thought) than *x*.

If there were a real horse that had wings and had-in-reality the other properties that Pegasus has-in thought, then the real horse would be greater than Pegasus (is, in fact).

Baker and Matthews have a fairly elaborate way of defending (G). They note that Pegasus has-in-thought various causal powers, for example, powers of flight. But they hold that these are all *mediated causal powers*, by which they mean that Pegasus has these powers in virtue of people thinking him to have them. They are not *unmediated* causal powers, which a real horse could have on its own, independently of what anyone (save God, perhaps) thought.[19] Baker and Matthews claim that "(G) is vindicated by the fact that something's having-in-reality unmediated causal powers is greater than an otherwise same thing's having in reality only mediated causal powers that depend on the thoughts of people who exist in reality" (2010, 47). This seems not to be stated quite correctly. *Being an otherwise exact same thing as* is not a symmetrical relation. It is defined to be a relation between a non-actual object of thought and a real object of thought, where the latter has-in-reality all of the properties the former has-in-thought. So there cannot be a thing that has an otherwise exact same thing with only mediated powers. If *y* is an otherwise exact same thing as *x*, then *y* exists in reality and does not have its properties only in virtue of the thoughts of others. Baker's and Matthew's point can easily be restated, however. It is the claim that if *y* is an otherwise exact same thing as *x*, then *y's* causal powers do not depend on what people think about it, whereas *x's* causal powers do depend on thoughts; and, therefore *y* is greater than *x*.[20] Having one's causal powers in a way that is not dependent upon being thought (by people) to have them makes a thing greater than a thing whose powers are had only in thought. Putting the claim this way, however, suggests that the focus on *causal* powers is unnecessary. Having *any* property in reality is enough to make a thing greater than a thing that has its properties only derivatively—or, putting the point more cautiously, if a thing has its properties in thought, then anything that has all of those properties in reality is greater. If an object of thought has-in-thought such properties as *omnipotence, omniscience, aseity,* etc., then a thing that exists in reality and has these same properties in reality is greater. There does not seem to be anything special or unique in this regard about *causal* properties.

D. Return to the Argument

Let us see how all of this bears on the ontological argument. Recall the simple version of the argument I stated at the outset: As before, fix the reference of 'B' by means of the description 'the being than which a greater cannot be conceived'.

(1) B does not exist. (assumption for *reductio*)

(2) For all *x*, if *x* does not exist, then it conceivable that there is something greater than *x*. (premiss)

∴ (3) If B does not exist, then it conceivable that there is something greater than B. (2), universal instantiation

∴ (4) It is conceivable that there is something greater than B. (1), (3), *modus ponens*

(5) It is not conceivable that there is something greater than B. (premiss)

∴ (6) B exists. (1)-(5), *reductio ad absurdum*

As we saw, a standard objection to the argument in this form is that the inference from (2) to (3) *assumes* that that than which nothing greater can be conceived already exists. A claim that holds of everything holds of everything that *exists*, but there is no guarantee that it holds of non-existent things (if there are any). For example, it seems true that every horse is at a particular spatio-temporal distance from here now. It is therefore perfectly legitimate to deduce that Zenyatta is at a particular spatio-temporal distance from here now or to deduce that Rachel Alexander is at a particular spatio-temporal distance from here now. But it would be a mistake to deduce that Pegasus is at a particular spatio-temporal distance from here now, even if you think that there are other truths about Pegasus.[21]

By appealing to objects of thought and drawing on their principles (OES) and (G), Baker and Matthews can provide an alternate argument for line (4), one that does not require universal instantiation onto an object whose existence is in question.[22] They could rewrite the initial steps of the argument as follows:

(1') B does not exist in reality. (assumption for *reductio*)

(2') If B does not exist in reality, then if it is possible for something to have in reality all of the properties that B has in thought, then it is conceivable that there is something greater than B. (OES), (B)

(3') It is possible that something has in reality all of the properties that B has in thought. (premiss)

∴ (4) It is conceivable that there is something greater than B. (1), (3), *modus ponens*

On the assumption (1') that B does not exist, Baker's and Matthews' account has it that 'B' refers to a certain mere object of thought, an object of thought that has-in-thought the property *being that than which nothing greater can be conceived*. According to their principles (OES) and (G), if it is possible for something to have that property (and any others that B has-in-thought) in reality, then it is

possible for there to be an otherwise exact same thing as B and, thus, possible for something to be greater than B.

A complication arises, however, if we think that the argument could easily be adapted to apply to God instead of B. We would begin by supposing that God is an object of thought that does not exist in reality, and we could add then that God has-in-thought a set of impressive properties, *being omnipotent, being omniscient, being that than which nothing greater can be conceived*, etc. So if it is conceivable for something that also exists in reality to have-in-reality all of these properties, by (OES) such a thing would be an otherwise exact same thing as God, and by (G) it would be greater than God. So, on the assumptions that God does not exist in reality and that it is conceivable that there be something that is an otherwise exact same thing as God, it follows that it is conceivable that there is something greater than God, which is what the fourth line of the argument would say.

If, however, God is the object of thought that Jews, Christians, and Muslims all worship, then a problem looms. As we saw, Baker and Matthews endorse the claim that "if we can provide evidence that there is indeed such a common object of worship, across various languages, and within different cultures, then we have good reason to say that God, not just as a formula or an idea, but as an object of worship, exists at least in the understanding" (2010, 44). If *this* is the object of thought that is the subject of Anselm's argument and it does not exist in reality, then it will have-in-thought many extraordinary attributes, but some of them will be incompatible with others. The social way in which mere objects of thought acquire their properties-in-thought is by people thinking of them in those ways. So Christians will think of God as triune, and Jews and Muslims will think of God as not triune. Thus, if God does not exist in reality, the set of properties he has-in-thought will include both *being triune* and *not being triune*. In that case, it would not be possible that there be something that is an otherwise exact same thing as God, because such a thing would have to have-in-reality a set of logically incompatible properties.[23] So if God is the object of thought the western theistic religions worship in common, Baker's and Matthew's account seems insufficient to establish premiss (4) (with 'God' replacing 'B').

There is, of course, an easy way around this problem. It is to restrict the object of thought under dispute simply to what Anselm and his atheist opponent explicitly mention, namely, that than which nothing greater can be conceived. The set of properties an otherwise exact same thing as that than which nothing greater can be conceived, if the latter did not exist, would have to have in reality would simply be the set containing *being such that nothing greater can be conceived* and whatever other properties are entailed by that one. If Anselm is right that "God is whatever it is better to be than not" (*Pros.* 4) and that it is better to be the maker of all other beings, to be happy, just, omnipotent, merciful, etc. (*Pros.* 5–6), then it would still be a substantial achievement to demonstrate that such a being exists.[24]

So it seems that Baker and Matthews can provide an alternative argument in support of premiss (4). On the assumption that that than which nothing greater can be conceived does not exist, our terms for that object of thought, namely, 'B' or 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' refer to a certain object of thought that exists in thought only and has its salient properties in thought only. If it is conceivable that some really existing thing have those properties in reality, then, by principle (G), it is conceivable that there be something greater that the thing to which 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' refers. So, it is conceivable that there is something greater than B, which is what (4) says.

Now, however, it is considerably less clear that Baker and Matthew provide us with a reason to accept

(5) It is not conceivable that there is something greater than B.

Recall that according to Baker and Matthews, 'B' *refers* to an object of thought. Thus (5) should be understood *de re*[25] as

(5*) B is such that it is not conceivable that there is something greater than it.

But the assumption that 'B' is referential leads to a serious difficulty. If the being than which nothing greater can be conceived really exists, for example, if God exists, then 'B' refers to it. In that case (5*) expresses

(5*R) *God* is such that it is not conceivable that there be a being greater than it.

On the other hand, if the being than which nothing greater can be conceived does not exist in reality, if it is a mere object of thought, a fictional entity that can be modeled by an incomplete set of properties, then 'B' refers to that mere object of thought. In this case we can understand (5*) as

(5*U) *The mere object of thought that has-in-thought the property of being such nothing greater can be conceived* is such that it is not conceivable that there is something greater than it.

Now (5*R) is eminently plausible. The same cannot be said for (5*U), however. Indeed, according to Baker's and Matthews' account, (5*U) is false, as we have just seen in tracing their argument for (4). If the being than which it is not conceivable that there be a greater is a mere object of thought, then, it is conceivable that there is something greater than it, provided that it is conceivable that something have-in-reality all of the properties that object of thought has-in-thought.

So (5*) either expresses the true proposition (5*R), or it expresses the false

proposition (5*U). Which one that is, the truth or the falsehood, depends upon whether the being than which it is not conceivable that there be a greater exists in reality. If we do not *assume* that God exists, or that 'B' refers to an object that exists in reality, we cannot say whether (5*) expresses a truth or a falsehood.

My conclusion is that starting from the assumption that Anselm and his atheist opponent both refer, neutrally, to an object of thought, whether or not that object of thought exists, leaves it equally open whether a crucial premiss of the argument is true. The atheist, believing that the phrase 'the being than which nothing greater can be conceived' refers to a non-actual object of thought, has no reason to agree that it is not conceivable that any being be greater than *it*, and, in fact, Baker and Matthews provide a reason for the atheist to support that position. I am thus not persuaded of Baker's and Matthew's claim that "the argument appears to be sound, and the existence of God is proved" (2010, 50).[26]

University of Rochester

Appendix

Baker's and Matthew's (2010, 47–49) Version of the Ontological Argument

Stage 1

    a.   The theist and the atheist refer to the same object with the words, "that than which nothing greater can be conceived."

Therefore,

    b.   That than which nothing greater can be conceived is an object that exists in both the theist's and the atheist's understanding (by (a) and the meaning of "existing in the understanding").

Let S be the object that exists in the theist's and atheist's understanding and that is such that nothing greater can be conceived. So,

    c.   S is the object that exists in the theist's and atheist's understanding and that is such that nothing greater can be conceived ((b) and stipulation of "S").

Therefore,

    d.   S exists in thought ((c) and stipulation "exists in the understanding" = "exists in thought").

Stage 2

    1.   S exists in thought and S does not exist in reality (premiss for *reductio ad absurdum*).

    2.   An otherwise exact same thing as S that existed both in thought and in reality is conceivable (premiss).

[Therefore,]

    3.   If S exists in thought and not in reality and an otherwise exact same thing as S that existed both in thought and in reality is conceivable, then an otherwise exact same thing as S that existed both in thought and in reality would be greater than S (by (1) and Principle (G)).

[Therefore,]

4. An otherwise exact same thing as S that existed both in thought and in reality would be greater than S ((1), (2) conjunction, (3) *modus ponens*).

[Therefore (?)]

5. If an otherwise exact same thing as S that existed both in thought and in reality and is conceivable would be greater than S, then there can be a conceivable object that is greater than S (namely, an otherwise exact same thing as S that also existed in reality). [(2), (4) and a principle of transfer of conceivability?].

Therefore,

6. There can be a conceivable object that is greater than S ((4), (5), *modus ponens*).

7. There can be no conceivable object that is greater than S (line (c) above) [premiss].

[Therefore,]

8. There can be a conceivable object that is greater than S, and there can be no conceivable object that is greater than S ((6), (7), conjunction).

Therefore,

9. It is not the case that: S exists in thought and S does not exist in reality ((1)-(8), *reductio ad absurdum*).

10. S does exist in reality ((9), DeMorgan's rule, line (d), disjunctive syllogism).

Comments:

a. I have replaced brackets in the original with parentheses so that I could use brackets to indicate my own insertions.

b. Baker and Matthews make it clear that "can be a conceivable object" means "it is metaphysically possible that there is a conceivable object" (n. 46), and I suppose that a conceivable object is something that is or could be an object of thought.

   c.   My claim in the paper is that Baker's and Matthew's account provides a justification for (6), at least if one is willing to countenance objects of thoughts that do not exist in reality, but it leaves (7) in doubt.

   d.   The reason that (7) is dubious is that it is ambiguous. If 'S' refers merely to a non-actual object of thought that has-in-thought the property of *being that than which nothing greater can be conceived*, then the proposition expressed by (7) is false. If 'S' refers to a being who exists in reality and has-in-reality the property of *being that than which nothing greater can be thought*, then the proposition expressed by (7) is true. As long as the theist and the atheist agree merely that 'S' refers to some object of thought—leaving it open whether that is a mere object of thought or a really existing being who really has properties—it remains open whether (7) expresses a truth. To claim that it is true is to claim something that presupposes that that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in reality and has this impressive property in reality, which is what the argument is supposed to demonstrate.

Notes

1 See Charlesworth (1979, 3–7) for a description of the argument's comparative neglect in the 12th century and a capsule summary of its treatment by philosophers from the 13th through 18th centuries.

2 Matthews (2005), Matthews and Baker (2010), Baker and Matthews (2010), Matthews and Baker (2011).

3 Isaiah 7:9, in the Septuagint.

4 Augustine's actual argument is not as compelling or as interesting as Anselm's. Here is his summary: "You granted, moreover, that if I showed you something higher than our minds, you would admit, assuming that nothing existed which was still higher, that God exists. I accepted your condition and said that it was enough to show this. For if there is something more excellent than truth, this is God. If there is not, then truth itself is God. Whether or not truth is God, you cannot deny that God exists, and this was the question with which we agreed to deal" (Bk. II Ch. 15).

5 Compare Augustine's tripartite division of objects of belief in *Eighty-three Different Questions*. There are propositions that are believed but never understood, for example, beliefs about history. There are beliefs that are understood as soon as they are believed, for example, propositions of mathematics. And there are things which are first believed then later understood, for example, propositions about divine things. That propositions about mathematics are understood as soon as they are believed suggests that understanding in this case involves seeing that a proposition is self-evidently true or that it is *a priori*. The reason propositions about the past are never understood is perhaps due to the fact that there can never be a demonstration of them from propositions of the kind that are self-evident. But that propositions about divine matters can be understood after being believed is perhaps because, as Augustine thinks, there can be a (tenuous) form of reasoning leading to them from propositions that are self-evidently true. Augustine makes a further intriguing claim in this passage which I am not able to explain, however. It is that the divine matters can only be understood by "those who are pure in heart" (Q. 48).

6 Despite the many similarities between Augustine and Anselm, arguing for God's existence by way of a *reductio* seems not to have occurred to Augustine.

7   Cf. Graham Oppy's diagnosis of what is wrong with ontological arguments: "In any version of one of the historical arguments, it will be the case that the singular terms and quantifiers—names, definite descriptions, indefinite descriptions, and so forth—used in the statement of the argument—to refer to, or denote, or to range over a collection that is supposed to include, that divine object whose existence is to be established by the argument—either occur embedded in the scope of further sentential operators, or they do not occur thus embedded. It they do not occur thus embedded, then an opponent of the argument can reasonably object that the question has been begged" (1995, 115).

8   In the earlier (Baker, 2009), the term was "thought-objects".

9   In (2009) Baker says explicitly that "thought-objects ... are in the ontology and subject to quantification" (mss. p. 2).

10   It is an empirical fact that we can successfully communicate with each other using names or definite descriptions that, as I would put it, do not refer. It is less clear that we have evidence for the claim that such terms *refer* to a special class of objects.

11   John Chapman, 1774–1845. I assume that he is on the list because some people talk about him while assuming that he was (merely) a legend.

12   I *think* that another way Baker and Matthews might distinguish mere objects of thought from actually existing objects of thought is that mere objects of thought have all of their had-in-thought properties essentially. Pegasus couldn't have failed to have been captured by Bellerophon (in thought), although it could have failed to have been depicted in such-and such painting (in reality).

13   As Baker and Matthews note, this claim ignores possible complications due to vagueness. What they actually say, however, is "... for any given property, an object that exists in reality either has-in-reality that property or it fails to have-it-in-reality" (39). This way of putting the point does not mark a distinction between mere objects of thought and really existing objects of thought, for both satisfy this condition. It would not help to say that mere objects of thought are such that for any property they either *have-in-thought* that property or they fail to have it *in thought*, for presumably they fail to have in thought all of the properties no one has thought them to have. But mere objects of thought do not satisfy this condition: for any property,

they either have-in-thought that property or they have-in-thought the complement of that property. Sherlock Holmes neither has-in-thought the property of weighing ten stone nor does he have-in-thought the property of not weighing ten stone.

[14]   The Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong (1853–1920) is the father of Meinongianism. Baker and Matthews cite Parsons (1980) and Zalta (1983) as contemporary Meinongians. The leading idea is that there are, in some sense, non-existent objects.

[15]   Some Meinongian theories have principles that say under what conditions a non-actual object exists. For example, in (Parsons, 1980) for any set of "nuclear" properties, such as, *being blue, being a mountain*, etc., some object has all the properties in the set and no more.

[16]   (2005, 94–95). Baker and Matthews allude to this passage in support of their claim that God is an object of thought, whether he exists in reality or not (2010, 44).

[17]   An interesting alternative treatment of the argument is given by Wolterstorff (1993). He holds, in effect, that for Anselm and the Fool to disagree they must mean the same thing (rather than *refer* to the same thing), and he interprets Gaunilo as denying that we can refer to God if God does not exist.

[18]   It is tempting to identify a non-actual thing with the set of properties it has-in-thought. On this suggestion, Pegasus just *is* the set {*being a horse, having wings, having been ridden by Bellerophon*, etc.}. This makes it easy to agree with Baker and Matthews that Pegasus exists—it just isn't *really* a winged horse. But Baker and Matthews would resist this suggestion. They write, "An object of thought, however, is not a representation of an object thought about or referred to, let alone a concept of such an object; rather, it is the very person or thing thought about or referred to, whether it exists in reality or not" (210, 36). Perhaps, however, we may represent unreal objects of thoughts in this way.

[19]   In both (Matthews and Baker, 2010) and (Matthews and Baker, 2011) the distinction between mediated and unmediated causal powers figures prominently, along with an emphasis on the value of the latter. I insert the qualifier 'independently *of God*' in case everything except for God depends on his thoughts.

20 An additional complication I shall not pursue here: (G) specifies a *counterfactual* condition. It does not require that a non-actual thing really have an otherwise exact same thing. Rather, it says that if for a non-actual thing *x* there were a thing *y* that is an otherwise exact same thing as *x*, *y* would be greater than *x*. Even this formulation leaves out some details, for presumably the various greatnesses here should be relativized to worlds. We could try

> (G*) For any thing *x* and world *W*, if *x* is an object of thought in *W* but does not exist in reality in *W*, then for any thing *y* and world *W*', if *y* exists in *W*' and has-in-reality in *W*' all of the properties that *x* has-in-thought in *W*, then the greatness of *y* in *W*' exceeds the greatness of *x* in *W*.

This formulation secures the intended result, namely, if a thing doesn't really exist but something could have-in-reality all of its properties, then it is possible that something is greater than it. It should be noted that (G) and (G*) specify a sufficient condition for an object of thought to have (or possibly to have) something be greater than it, but it is not completely general. For example, it licenses the claim that something could be greater than Sherlock Holmes, because there could be an actual thing that had in reality all of Holmes' had-in-thought properties, and such a thing would be greater than Holmes. But (G) does not justify the claim that something could be greater than Dr. Watson, because we know that nothing *could* have in reality all of Watson's had-in-thought properties (those incompatible war wounds). This limitation will not prevent (G) from being used in the Ontological Argument, however, provided that it is possible for something to have in reality all of the properties that the greatest conceivable being has in thought.

21 On Baker's and Matthews' account, as we have seen, mere objects of thought are "incomplete". Let us suppose that properties specifying Pegasus' location are among the ones that are missing.

22 I will discuss Baker's and Matthew's view as it applies to the simple argument in the text, but their full argument is given in the appendix, for anyone who wants to verify that what I say applies to the argument they actually give.

23 This point does not depend upon the ecumenical proposal that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God. Even different believers within a single tradition will attribute incompatible attributes to God, for

example, Christians who disagree about whether God is eternal or not eternal but everlasting instead.

24 It would leave open the question of the relation between that than which nothing greater can be conceived and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For a discussion of some of these issues, see my (2011). There is another, possibly more serious, issue that arises from switching from an object of thought that arises in established and pervasive religious practice to the limited, minimal one that emerges from the artificial debate between Anselm and his opponent. It is that two people could introduce for discussion an arbitrary additional attribute compatible with being that than which nothing greater can be conceived. For example, Anselm could try to persuade the Fool of the existence the being who is that than which nothing greater can be conceived and who guarantees that the Chicago Cubs win the 2013 World Series. If the argument using the minimal property of *being that than which nothing greater can be conceived* is a sound proof, an arbitrarily expanded property should also yield a sound proof. One might try to object that ensuring that the Cubs win the Series does not contribute to a being's greatness, and perhaps that is right. But according to Baker's and Matthews' principle (G), if the object of thought who has-in-thought the properties of *being that than which nothing greater can be conceived* and *ensuring that the Cubs win the 2013 Series* does not exist, then a thing existing in reality who has-in-reality both of those properties is indeed greater. Worse, Anselm could also give a second argument for the existence of a being who is that than which nothing greater can be conceived and who *prevents* the Chicago Cubs from winning the 2013 World Series. There seems to no obstacle to using two arguments to prove the existence of two beings who could not possibly both exist.

25 My claim in the text is that Baker's and Matthew's referential interpretation of 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' requires them to interpret (5) as de re. A second reason is that (5) must be interpreted in this way if it is to contradict (4). The argument that Baker and Matthews give for (4), that it is conceivable that there be a being greater than the being than which it is not conceivable that there be a greater (on the assumption that the latter does not exist in reality), is an argument for the *de re* interpretation of (4). Under the assumption that that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists only in the understanding, principle (G) licenses the conclusion (given that it is conceivable that something existing in reality has all of the former being's properties) that it is conceivable that there is something that is greater *than that being*, which is a *de re* reading.

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