



intelligit ad hunc.

omnipotentis deus &  
domine. misere  
veniam peccato  
re. vincere. omni  
& delectationes no  
& actu uitate

# Anselm and the Ontological Argument

Oxford, Bodl., Auct. D. 2. 6., fol. 193v.

# Overview

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The ontological argument

Anselm's ontological argument

- God exists

- God necessarily exists

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- The Lost Island

# Anselm of Canterbury



- 1033–1109, Kingdom of Arles (today: France)
- Abbot of Bec, then archbishop of Canterbury
- Conflicts with Henry I
- Works: *Monologion*, *Proslogion*, *Cur Deus Homo*
- Formulated perhaps *the* best known argument for God's existence.

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# Ontological Argument

- The term derives from Immanuel Kant
- There are various ontological arguments; e.g., Anselm, Descartes
- **General idea:**
  - A concept usually does not imply whether its object exists or not — e.g., I can know what ‘goblin’ means (=‘a mischievous and ugly demon’ (OED)), without knowing whether goblins exist or not.
  - According to the ontological argument, this is different in the case of God: **if I have a concept of God, that somehow implies that he exists.**
  - This is why it is ‘ontological’ = has to do with existence, it turns on what it is *to be* God.

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# Anselm's Ontological Argument

- From the *Proslogion*: a work written in a form of prayer
- Nevertheless, it is a strictly philosophical argument
- Arguing for 2 claims:
  - 1 God exists
  - 2 God necessarily exists
- **Indirect argument (*reductio ad absurdum*)**: we are trying to prove that  $P$ , so suppose it is not the case that  $P$ . From  $\sim P$  something impossible follows; therefore, our indirect assumption was false. Since  $\sim P$  is false,  $P$  must be true.

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# Argument 1: God Exists

## *Proslogion*, ch. 2 (81–82)

Now we believe that you are something than which nothing greater can be thought. So can it be that no such nature exists, since “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’ ”? But when this same fools hears me say “something than which nothing greater can be thought,” he surely understand what he hears; and what he understands exists in his understanding. . . . And surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist only in the understanding. For if it exists only in the understanding, it can be thought to exist in reality as well, which is greater. . . . But that is clearly impossible. Therefore, there is no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality.

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# Argument 1: God Exists

- 1 God is something than which nothing greater can be thought.  
[Definition]
- 2 The fool said in his heart: “There is no God.” [Premise]
- 3 The fool understands what he says and what he hears.  
[Assumption]
- 4 The fool understands (1). [From 1,2,3]
- 5 Everything that is understood is in the mind. [Assumption]
- 6 God exists at least in the mind. [From 4,5]

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# Argument 1: God Exists

- 7 Suppose that God only exists in the mind. [Indirect assumption]
- 8 Whatever exists both in the mind and in reality is greater than that which exists only in the mind. [Definition of 'greater']
- 9 There is a greater thing than God that can be thought of (i.e., something that exists both in the mind and in reality). [From 7,8]
- 10 There is a thing that can be thought of which is greater than the thing than which nothing greater can be thought. [From 1,9]
- 11 Since (10) is a contradiction, it follows that (7) is false.  
∴ Therefore, God exists not only in the mind, but also in reality. [From 7,11]

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# Argument 1: God Exists

- 1 **The definition:** God = something than which nothing greater can be thought.
  - minimal definition; no theological assumptions
  - does not imply that we have an adequate conception of God; this is just how we use the word 'God'.
- 2 **“The fool says in his heart: There is no God.”** *Psalm 14:1*; there has to be someone who is saying or thinking the sentence.
- 3 **The fool understands what he says:** the argument would not work with parrots, for example.
- 5 **What is understood is in the mind:** this is just what understanding means.

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# Argument 1: God Exists

## 8 Whatever exists both in the mind and outside, is greater than which exists only in the mind:

- $a$  is greater than  $b$  if  $a$  has everything that  $b$  has *plus* something more
- Anselm is comparing ideas here: one of them has a counterpart in reality, the other does not.



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# Argument 1: God Exists

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## Argument 2: God Necessarily Exists

### *Proslogion*, ch. 3 (82)

This [being] exists so truly that it cannot even be thought not to exist. For it is possible to think that something exists that cannot be thought not to exist, and such a being is greater than one that can be thought not to exist.

Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought not to exist, then that than which a greater cannot be thought is *not* that than which a greater cannot be thought; and this is a contradiction. So that than which a greater cannot be thought exists so truly that it cannot even be thought not to exist.

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# Argument 2: God Necessarily Exists

Necessarily exists = cannot be thought not to exist

- 1 A being that cannot be thought not to exist is greater than the being that can be thought not to exist. [From the definition of 'greater']
  - 2 Something can be thought to exist that cannot be thought not to exist. [Premise]
  - 3 If God can be thought not to exist, then a greater being can be thought (which cannot be thought not to exist). [From 1,2]
  - 4 But that would be a contradiction.
- ∴ Therefore, God cannot be thought not to exist (that is, he necessarily exists).

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- Gaunilo: if Anselm's argument works for demonstrating the existence of God, it should also work for demonstrating the existence of the most perfect island. [Is this true?]
- Kant, against Descartes's version: existence is not a perfection (not even a predicate). [Does Anselm's argument presuppose that existence is a perfection? – Arguably not.]



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- 1 If Anselm's proof for God's existence (the existence of the greatest conceivable being) were sound, then we could give a sound proof for the existence of the greatest conceivable island.
  - 2 We cannot give a sound proof of the existence of the greatest conceivable island.
- ∴ Therefore, Anselm's proof for God's existence is not sound.

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# P1: The Lost Island

## Gaunilo, "On behalf of the Fool" (102)

They say that there is the ocean somewhere an island which... some have called the 'Lost Island.' And the story goes that it is blessed with all manner of priceless riches and delights in abundance ... and ... is superior everywhere in abundance to all those other lands that men inhabit. Now, if anyone tell me that it is like this, I shall easily understand what is said... But if he should then go on to say, as though it were a logical consequence of this: You cannot any more doubt that this island that is more excellent than all other lands truly exists somewhere in reality than you can doubt that it is in your mind; and since it is more excellent to exist not only in the mind alone but also in reality, therefore it must needs be that it exists. For if it did not exist, any other land existing in reality would be more excellent than it, and so this island, already conceived by you to be more excellent than others, will not be more excellent.

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# The Lost Island

1	God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived.	The Lost Island is that than which no greater island can be conceived.
2	God only exists in the mind.	The Lost Island only exists in the mind.
3	Whatever exists both in the mind and in reality is greater than that which exists only in the mind.	Whatever exists both in the mind and in reality is greater than that which exists only in the mind.
4	It is conceivable that God exists in reality.	It is conceivable that the Lost Island exists in reality.
5	It is conceivable that there is a being greater than that than which nothing greater can be conceived.	It is conceivable that there is an island greater than that island than which no greater island can be conceived.
	2 is false.	2 is false.

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## What does this mean?

- Either that Anselm's original argument is somewhere wrong (we do not yet know where)
- Or that the analogy between the two arguments breaks down somewhere.

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# Strategy 1: Where Anselm's Argument Goes Wrong

According to Gaunilo, Anselm's argument goes wrong because of P2: that God exists in the mind.

- This would be true if we really understood what 'God' meant
- But we do not really understand it.
- We only have a nominal definition: we understand what the words mean in "the being than which nothing greater can be conceived", but we do not really understand the definition.
- E.g.:  $e^{i\pi} = -1$
- Since 'God' is not *really* in our minds (we do not really understand what the term 'God' means), Anselm's argument does not work — at least according to Gaunilo.

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## Strategy 2: Possible Disanalogies

- A defender of Anselm could say that although Gaunilo's Lost Island argument does not work, Anselm's original argument does.
- This could be in two ways:
  - 1 Either that Gaunilo's argument is invalid, while Anselm's is valid – This does not seem very plausible, since the logic of the 2 arguments are the same.
  - 2 Or that Gaunilo's argument has a false premise while Anselm's does not.
    - E.g., one could say that the idea of an island than which no greater can be conceived, is incoherent.

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