

What Part of Fides Quaerens don't you Intellectum? On a Persistent Philosophical Misunderstanding of Anselm's "Ontological Argument"

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Introduction¹

This paper addresses a common misunderstanding of Anselm's argument for the existence of God in chapter 2 of the *Proslogion*. I offer a corrective reading of the text in light of Anselm's expressed intent in the *Proslogion* and elsewhere in his corpus, especially his exchange with Gaunilo. If there is time, or perhaps during questions, I'll address some possible objections to my reading of Anselm's argument. *NB: Apologies for male pronouns – matching my sources.*

The Unum Argumentum

Anselm tells us that the *Proslogion* (P) is unique because it does with a "single argument" what he had previously needed a complex chain of arguments to do in his *Monologion* (M).

I began to ask myself whether perhaps a single consideration [*unum argumentum*] could be found which would require nothing other than itself for proving itself and which would suffice by itself to demonstrate (1) that God truly [i.e., really] exists and (2) that He is the Supreme Good (needing no one else, yet needed by all [else] in order to exist and to fare well) and whatever [else] we believe about the Divine Substance.²

Because ch. 2 is called "That God Truly Exists" philosophers have understandably thought that this single argument is to be found here. Countless textbooks have offered up this chapter as the original statement of the "ontological argument."³ This assumption is made even more plausible by the rhetoric Anselm employs in P2, and throughout the P more generally. His language in P2 makes it *appear* that he has an elaborate metaphysical system embracing distinct modes of being, one "in the understanding," and one "in reality."⁴ As he makes clear though, in his reply to Gaunilo, Anselm has no such doctrine in view. Nor does he understand existence to be a perfection or a predicate as Kant

famously argued in response to a pseudo-Anselmian strawman.⁵ So, just what is Anselm's argument for the existence of God in P2?⁶

It will be helpful to have a sophisticated standardization of the argument offered in P2 before us as we proceed.⁷

- (1) God is that than which no greater can be thought.⁸
- (2) That than which no greater can be thought exists in the understanding. (i.e., One understands the formula, that than which no great can be thought.)
- (3) Assume, that than which no greater can be thought exists in the understanding alone.
- (4) That than which no greater can be thought can be thought to exist in reality, which is greater.
- (5) Thus, that than which no greater can be thought is that than which something greater can be thought – a contradiction. (4)
- (6) Therefore, that than which no greater can be thought exists in reality. (3-5)
- (7) Therefore, God exists in reality. (1 & 6)

This standardization arises from a natural enough reading of P2. It, or something very much like it, appears in our textbooks and has led to a cottage industry of jokes at Anselm's expense. The first and arguably still the best ribbing of this argument was offered by Gaunilo in his "Reply on Behalf of the Fool" who "said in his heart, there is no God" (Psalm 14:1) – the infamous, "Lost Island," purportedly an argument of the same form as P2:

- (1) The Lost Island is the greatest island.
- (2) The greatest island exists in the understanding.
- (3) Assume, the greatest island exists in the understanding alone.
- (4) The greatest island can be thought to exist in reality, which is greater.
- (5) Thus, the greatest island can be thought to be greater than it is. (4) A contradiction.
- (6) Therefore, the greatest island exists in reality. (3-5)
- (7) Therefore, the Lost Island exists in reality. (1 & 6)

But, everyone knows this is absurd! So, Gaunilo argues that the form of the argument is not convincing in the case of God because it can be used, magic like, to conjure anything we can think. So, it seems that Anselm has a serious challenge to meet.

But, nowhere does he answer Gaunilo's objection. This is especially curious because it was Anselm himself who asked those who would copy his P to include Gaunilo's Reply and his own Reply to Gaunilo.⁹ The exchange – which goes nowhere with respect to the Lost Island objection – must have seemed, to Anselm, to add something to the argument offered in the P. So, what did Anselm think he had proven in P2? This becomes clear when we turn to his reply to Gaunilo. For here Anselm expands on the highly compressed expressions found in P2.¹⁰

Anselm clearly thinks Gaunilo's objection amounts to two points:

(G1) That than which no greater can be thought cannot be thought. (At least not in a meaningful way.)

(G2) It does not follow that it exists also in reality. (GR1)

Anselm focuses on defending two claims:

(A1) That than which no greater can be thought can be thought.

(A2) If that than which no greater can be thought can be thought, it exists in reality.¹¹

If Anselm is successful here, then:

(A3) That than which no greater can be thought exists in reality. (A1&A2; *modus ponens*)

(G1) results from a common misunderstanding that many philosophers still have when reading P2. In the compressed presentation in P2 Anselm didn't elaborate what he means by having that than which no greater can be thought in the understanding.¹² In his reply to Gaunilo though he spells it out in some detail, but much more fully in the M and elsewhere. Put briefly what Anselm means by having that than which no greater can be thought in the understanding in P2 is having a *mentis conception* ("mental conception"; sometimes, "mental expression" or "rational expression"). In M10 Anselm tells us that having a mental conception is not just having a sentence or proposition in *mentis*. Rather, it is "viewing mentally" – a spiritual practice/contemplation – "with the acute gaze of thought, the things themselves which already exist or are going to exist." Anselm gives an example using man. I may speak of a man

when I use the word “man” to name him. I may also name him “man” silently to myself by thinking the name. And I can think of a man as when the mind “beholds him . . . by means of an image of a material thing.” All that is fine so far as it goes, but there is another level of thinking “man” when “when [my mind] thinks his universal being, viz., rational, mortal animal” (M10). It is this more robust, and difficult, type of having in the understanding that Anselm refers to in P2.

But, this is supposed to appertain to the understanding of the Fool. If Anselm is calling for understanding of the *thing* signified by the linguistic formula that than which no greater can be thought isn't he calling for, well, a rather intelligent fool? The clear answer here is yes. The fool he is concerned with is not an unintelligent person. His foolishness lies not in any intellectual defect, but in his mistaken judgment that God doesn't exist. The Fool simply fails to *understand* that than which no greater can be thought in the proper sense. As Visser and Williams put it, “Anyone who *really* has that than which nothing greater can be thought before his mind sees that the being not only does but must exist.”¹³

A thing can be thought in two ways. One involves merely thinking the word that signifies that thing. The other involves understanding what is signified. One may think “man” without knowing that this signifies a rational animal, etc. Anselm thinks that God can be thought to not exist only in this sense. We can rationally deny the existence of a thing called “God” all day, but if we understand what God is, we cannot think that God could possibly not exist. Anyone who truly thinks that than which no greater can be thought *necessarily* “understands that this being exists in such a way that he cannot, even in thought, fail to exist.”¹⁴ The thing that the Fool thinks might not exist is simply not God!¹⁵

Many readers, Gaunilo included, have misjudged P2 by underappreciating the work that Anselm thinks is needed to have that than which no greater can be thought in the understanding. Anselm invites this through his extremely condensed presentation of the argument, but the prayerful P1, “Arousal of the mind for contemplating God,” should be evidence enough. Both the believer and the Fool are being

tasked with much more mental work than simply understanding Anselm's awkward phrase. One has this in one's understanding in the proper sense if and only if one has a mental conception of a being than which no greater can be thought in view. For the believer this is a spiritual exercise (as evidenced by Anselm's frequent prayer); a matter of faith seeking understanding. For others, it is an intellectual activity that will lead to the understanding that God exists. But, and this is key I think, the Fool does not hear of that than which no greater can be thought without believers and their revealed faith. They can, and should, understand this truth once they hear it, but they cannot be expected to arrive at it on their own.¹⁶ The Fool is seeking to understand the faith of another and when they do they see that it is necessarily true.

When Gaunilo says that he can have no thought of God except what is had by the word "God" he is, Anselm argues, understandably mistaken. Yes, God is not known by a perfect analogy. God does not belong to a genus or species.¹⁷ Yes, we cannot *completely* understand God. But some things are *like* God, and they allow us to form an *idea* of God. Anselm calls our attention in AR8 to the fact that a lesser good is like a greater good precisely to the extent that they are good. For who does not immediately see "that if something which has a beginning and an end is a good, then a good which although it begins does not cease is a much better (good). And just as this . . . is a better (good) than this . . . even if . . . [this] is always moving from the past through the present toward the future. Yet, that (good) which in no way needs to be, or is compelled to be, changed or moved is far better . . . than this" (AR8).¹⁸

The intent here is, I think, clear enough; we can mount up to the thought that than which no greater can be thought. When Anselm says in P2 that that than which no greater can be thought exists in the understanding he is not referring to understanding a mere verbal formula – he means, as he clarifies in his response to Gaunilo, that one actually has that than which no greater can be thought before their minds, that they are contemplating this as a mental conception (intellectual image) of a God which always passes the limits of human understanding. And even the Fool can do this – but it's not

easy. Once we have that than which no greater can be thought in our understanding we see that it necessarily exists. Fortunately for the non-saints and fools among us, Anselm offers a series of arguments to this effect in his Reply each using the same basic form. In each, he picks out a feature of that than which no greater can be thought that cannot be predicated of a *possible* but *non-existent* being. For example, “if it can be so much as thought to exist, it must necessarily exist. For that than which no greater can be thought cannot be thought to begin to exist. By contrast, whatever can be thought to exist, but does not in fact exist, can be thought to begin to exist. Therefore, it is not the case that that than which no greater can be thought can be thought to exist, but does not in fact exist.”¹⁹ For good measure, Anselm uses the same form of argument with respect to omnipotence and necessary existence to further back up his reasoning that God exists in P2.

Anselm’s defense in the AR *nowhere* rests on something usually taken to be central to the ontological argument – the idea that something is greater if it exists in reality than if it exists in the understanding alone. In other words, Anselm doesn’t defend the idea that existence is a perfection. Why? Because either he didn’t notice that he should, or more charitably, because this is no part of his argument at all. Since he clearly takes himself to be simply expanding on what he had already said in P2, I think it most likely that Anselm is misleading in his language there because he is trying to say as little as possible to get his point across. “God’s intrinsic character [including not beginning to exist, being omnipotent, and necessary] is incompatible with” God’s “being a possible but nonexistent object.”²⁰ A necessary being exists necessarily.

In offering his Lost Island argument Gaunilo demonstrates that *he* understands Anselm to be saying that it is more excellent to exist in reality than merely in the understanding (GR6). But Anselm doesn’t understand Gaunilo’s objection here and thinks the objection is that it doesn’t follow that if it exists in the understanding, it exists in reality. And Anselm thinks that only God (understood as that than

which no greater can be thought) has a character such that it is incompatible to be possible and not existent. *Only* the necessary being exists necessarily.

Anselm also notes that the formula matters in ways that Gaunilo and countless others have not understood too. For example, Gaunilo substitutes “that which is greater than everything else” for “that than which no greater can be thought.” For a possible being that is greater than everything else can easily be thought not to exist. Take Superman (as Daniel Dennett recently did in a debate with Alvin Plantinga). It is *possible* that there is a person who is greater in every way than everyone else. But, there is nothing inconsistent in the idea that this Superman doesn’t exist. The same holds for the Lost Island, etc. Moreover, unlike God, there could always be a greater superhero than Superman. Determinate greatness can be added to indefinitely. God, in contrast, is always already supremely great, which is greater.

So, by reading the whole P and comparing it (as Anselm tells us we ought) to the M, and above all paying attention to the exchange with Gaunilo that he requested be included with his original text, we are able to reconstruct the argument for God’s existence in P2.²¹

- (1) God is that than which no greater can be thought.
- (2) A mental conception includes intuition of all features.
- (3) That which can be a mental conception is possible.
- (4) That than which no greater can be thought can be a mental conception.²²
- (5) Therefore, that than which no greater can be thought is possible.
- (6) Assume, that than which no greater can be thought is only a mental conception (i.e., it’s possible but not actual).
- (7) Whatever possibly exists, but does not in fact exist, can be thought to begin to exist [or to be omnipotent, or necessarily exist].
- (8) What does not begin to exist (i.e., eternal, uncaused, a se) is greater than what does.
- (9) It belongs to that than which no greater can be thought to have any feature that it is greater to have than not. (1, 2, & 4)
- (10) Therefore, that than which no greater can be thought is that than which a greater can be thought – a contradiction. (8 & 9)
- (11) Therefore, that than which no greater can be thought exists. (6 & 10)
- (12) Therefore, God exists. (1 & 11)

QED

Potential Problems with my Reconstruction of Anselm's Argument

Is God "that . . ."?

It is often objected that Anselm has done some mischief by defining God in the way he does in the P. The expression may well be insufficient to express "an intelligible thought" as Anthony Kenny says.²³ Anselm's reliance on thinking this apparently extremely difficult thought means that it matters a great deal if it is possible to have this mental experience or not.

But clearly the expression used to define God is not meant to capture God's nature in its fullness for in P15 Anselm uses it to argue that God is something greater than can be thought, because there can be thought to be something of this kind, and if God were not this then something greater than God could be thought – which is impossible given his definition of God. That than which no greater can be thought therefore opens our contemplation of God – it's a start, not a completion which could only come in the eschaton for blessed (or the infinite long run for the philosophers). That than which no greater can be thought is a symbol used to reach God. It's a ladder or an arrow not a wall around God.

Is God Possible?

If my reading of Anselm is accurate then the underlying logic of the argument is modal even though it took another 800 years or so for logicians to catch up.²⁴

- (M1) A necessary being is possible.
- (M2) If a necessary being is possible, it exists.
- (M3) Therefore, a necessary being exists.

Or, as Anselm would have it,

- (A1) That than which no greater can be thought can be thought.
- (A2) If that than which no greater can be thought can be thought, it exists in reality.
- (A3) Therefore, that exists in reality.

Anselm's argument is weak with respect to God's possible existence. He offers no support for this but rather assumes it, which seems to be to beg the question. Anselm assumes that anything that can be conceived mentally is non-contradictory and therefore possible. But, can one intuit something that is impossible? I do not think so, but that is an argument that needs to be made.

Thomas's Objection

Thomas Aquinas famously rejected a priori arguments for the existence of God in ST 1. q.2.a1.obj.2 & reply. Thomas here shares Gaunilo's misreading in thinking that the argument rests on the superiority of being in reality over being in *mentis* alone. He is mistaken for the same reason that Gaunilo is. Interestingly though Thomas frames this whole discussion in terms of the self-evidence of God, just as Descartes would go on to do explicitly while Anselm did so only by implication of his mental conception theory.

Kant's Objection

One difficulty that my reading of Anselm doesn't have is the one Kant famously leveled at the "ontological argument" – that existence is not a perfection, or existence is not a real predicate. We've seen that Gaunilo thought Anselm's argument relied on this, but Anselm nowhere concedes the point. Why? Because Gaunilo is incorrect in imputing this to Anselm. Indeed, Anselm doesn't even seem to notice the issue, because I argue, existence being a great making property plays no role in his argument at all. Kant missed this because like most modern philosophers he doesn't bother reading what Anselm wrote. He's relying on a simplified form of the Cartesian/Leibnizian ontological arguments which are arguably weaker than Anselm's, though Leibniz did realize that possibility needs to be demonstrated to demonstrate that God is actual.

Is there an Argument at all?

One of the hallmarks of Descartes' version of the ontological argument is its simplicity. Indeed, it reads more like the report of an intuition than a formal proof. Descartes underscores the simplicity of his demonstration by comparing it to the way we ordinarily establish very basic truths in arithmetic and geometry, such as that the number two is even or that the sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to the sum of two right angles. We intuit such truths directly by inspecting our clear and distinct ideas of the number two and of a triangle. So, likewise, we are able to attain knowledge of God's existence simply by apprehending that necessary existence is included in the clear and distinct idea of a supremely perfect being.²⁵

To the extent that the logic of Anselm's argumentum in P2 amounts to the point that a necessary being exists necessarily it can be seen to beg the question. Yes, if there were a necessary being it would exist. Anselm seems to think that there is something about the idea, or possibility, of such a being that requires its existence. But, how can that be?

It might be that this is a matter of the impossibility of arriving at the idea without it coming from the reality thus conceptualized, as Descartes thinks in *Meditation 3*. That is, Anselm's "argument" might instead be an intuition, like Descartes' "ontological argument."

Regardless, the whole enterprise seems much more like an invitation to have an intellectual intuition along with Anselm than an argument. The believer thinks what they believe through contemplation. Non-believers think what others believe through contemplation. When "seen" aright both realize that God's existence is necessary. This process is, as Descartes thought his version of the ontological argument was too, basically what we might call a spiritual experience – one has the idea of God before one's mind as an object and realizes that God must exist. An account can be added but ultimately one must, as the Psalmist puts it, "taste and see" for oneself. If you expect Anselm to do all the work for you the argument will fail in his terms. One must either begin in faith and seek to understand or she must seek to understand what is heard from those who believe. Without faith, the "argument" cannot even start. And without the intersection of intellect and imagination, the "argument" cannot conclude successfully. But it can demonstrate that one should believe once one has done the work because what is believed is true and could not be otherwise.

Conclusion

One way to think of the persistent misunderstanding by philosophers is that it is not clear if this is theology or philosophy. Anselm though doesn't recognize this distinction as we do. The only difference is where one starts for him. Theologian starts with faith and authorities. Philosopher starts with an effort to understand. Both end with the realization of the truth.

Anselm thinks that the believer can know via his *unum argumentum* and the non-believer will have obstacles to belief removed when they know what God is too.²⁶

¹ Anselm and his famous argument for the existence of God has always been difficult to understand. Is it theology? Is it philosophy? Well, yes and no. For Anselm knows no such distinction really. In fact, Church authorities refused to grant his work their imprimatur because he didn't cite any of the Fathers of the Church, but he was speaking about Divine things anyway.

Anselm did not see himself as doing what later modern philosophers would attempt with their variations on his "ontological argument." Nor did he see his task as merely one of explicating the Christian faith as some theologians and philosophers have argued (Barth chief among them).

The aim is not to convince the outsider through purely rational argument though either. Anselm's intent is to show that if one truly contemplates God one will see that God cannot fail to be and to be exactly what Christians already believe God to be.

² P, Preface; trans. Hopkins.

³ But, the first four chapters of the M are about God's existence but there are 76 others addressing all the other attributes of God. Many misread the P by thinking the "single argument" is *just* to show existence. If that were so, it would in no way be the re-working of the M that Anselm explicitly tells us it is.

⁴ It is often the case that we wrongly assume that past authors were aware of all the texts that predate them that we have access to. But in the medieval period this was virtually never the case. None of the great medieval thinkers had access to even a fraction of the ancient texts we often think they are responding to. Anselm, for example, only knew a small fraction of the Timaeus in Latin translation. The only Platonism he had access to was that found in the anthologized selections from the Fathers of the Church, above all Augustine. His knowledge of Aristotle too was almost completely dependent on the commentaries of Boethius. This persisted well into modernity too – Kant relied mostly on textbooks in theology and philosophy of religion rather than primary sources from the pre-modern period.

⁵ Kant shows no evidence of knowing P at all.

⁶ Here I am limiting my discussion to the argument for God's existence in P2 and skipping over the possibility of other versions present in P3 and/or P4. Importantly, the contemporary move to read a modal argument in P3 is on my reading superfluous as P2 is already modal in actual logical structure.

⁷ I am borrowing heavily here from Vissar & Williams, 75-76; adapted with Hopkins language.

⁸ I will employ this formula because, as Mitchell (2015) rightly points out it is the most common one employed by Anselm in the P. Other variations such as “something than which nothing greater can be thought” (*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*) are, for my purposes, synonymous and clearly intended to be by Anselm. Only in P15 does Anselm switch from this negative formulation to a positive one that only holds if God really exists. By P15 Anselm therefore takes himself to have established that God exists.

Greatness, as we will see, is a matter of self-sufficiency, aseity, dignity, etc. for Anselm. Contingency of any kind is a sign that something is less-than as the work of art is less great than the artist who crafts it or any good act is less good than the *summum bonum*. This makes sense as theologically speaking it is the contrast between necessary existent and contingent existent that characterizes the relation we call “creation.” When we say that the world is God’s creation we’re saying that it depends on God and that God depends on nothing. This is closely associated with dignity in Anselm’s mind as is clear in his *Cur Deus Homo*, etc.

⁹ Eadmer, *Vita Sancti Anselmi*, in Southern, *The Life of St Anselm*, 31.

¹⁰ I am here following the lead of work of Visser and Williams, *Anselm* (OUP, 2008).

¹¹ Apparently, MS Word is Kantian – it offers to correct “exists in reality” to “exists.”

¹² Indeed, he didn’t elaborate anything very much in P because his text is meant to be meditated upon and contemplated with carefully. It’s not a text to convey propositional knowledge (see P, Preface and P1).

¹³ 81, emphasis added.

¹⁴ P2; V&W, 81.

¹⁵ This is still the basic strategy against atheists – many argue that the God denied by the New Atheists is simply a misunderstanding of one type or another. John Smith (1618-1652) was one of the first modern thinkers to employ this tactic against atheism. Atheism is a mistake based on misunderstanding what it denies.

¹⁶ In this context, Anselm is radically different from Descartes who argues that the idea of a perfect being is innate. Anselm nowhere says this.

¹⁷ This is another confusion common to atheists who argue that theists have just not given up that last remaining god, presuming a polytheistic past common to all. This God that Anselm is speaking about is not one of those gods at all. At most such a deity would be the greatest being we have yet encountered but could not possibly be the greatest possible being. After all, it takes no great imagination to improve upon Zeus.

¹⁸ Greatness therefore is essentially a matter of self-sufficiency and aseity for Anselm. The non-contingent is superior to the contingent.

¹⁹ V&W, 83-84

²⁰ V&W, 85

²¹ Adapted from V&W, 88-92.

²² Because P2 says “when” not “that” God is understood.

²³ *Medieval Philosophy*, 294.

²⁴ P2 is modal. Many argue there is a second argument in P3 that has a modal structure. But I think that all of the arguments concluding with a divine attribute in the P are modal. One need not re-do the “ontological argument” along these lines to get around Kant – Anselm always already did!

²⁵ Nolan, Lawrence, "Descartes' Ontological Argument", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/descartes-ontological/>>.

²⁶ In this respect, Anselm hints that there are two ways to the same truth – contemplative prayer and philosophical contemplation. What to contemplate for the philosopher is first revealed. But there is no obvious reason to think that such revelation is rare or exclusively Christian.

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