Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, chapters 2-5 & replies
(or, the Ontological Argument for God’s Existence)

**Existing in Understanding vs. Reality:** Imagine a magical horse with a horn on its head. Do you understand what I’ve just described? Good. You are imagining a unicorn. Since you understand the concept of a unicorn, a unicorn exists in your understanding (or, in your imagination).

Now, does the unicorn you are imagining ALSO exist IN REALITY? No. So, unicorns exist in the following way:

(a) Unicorns do exist in your understanding.
(b) Unicorns do not exist in reality.

In short, *existing in the understanding* and *existing in reality* are two different things. Anselm gives an example of a painter who first sees the painting that they want to produce in their mind (so that it exists in their understanding) and then actually PAINTS it (so that it then ALSO exists in reality).

Anselm famously argued that (unlike unicorns and paintings), if you can simply understand the concept of God (and he believes you can), then God—who therefore exists in your understanding—automatically ALSO exists in reality. In short, the mere concept of God entails that He actually exists. Let’s see how.

**That Than Which No Greater Can Be Thought:** Anselm asks you to imagine the greatest possible being—i.e., a being that is greater than any other possible being that you can imagine. He describes such a being as “that than which no greater can be thought [i.e., imagined, or conceived of].”

Such a being would be **maximally good.** That is, for any good feature that you can conceive of something having, this being would have that feature—and would have it to the greatest degree possible. Justice? This being would have it; and it would have it maximally, so it would be PERFECTLY just. Wisdom? It has it, and perfectly. Power? It has it, perfectly. And so on.

Do you have some understanding of the being I’ve just described? Good. So, such a being exists in your understanding.
The Ontological Argument: So far, we’ve established that “that than which no greater can be thought” exists in your understanding, just like unicorns do. Does this being ALSO exist in reality? The answer is either ‘yes’ or ‘no’, as follows. Either,

(a) This being exists ONLY in your understanding, and NOT in reality, or
(b) This being exists BOTH in your understanding AND in reality.

The atheist will say that (a) is the case. That is, that even though they have the concept of such a being—so that it exists in their understanding—such a being does not also exist in reality. Anselm says that (a) is impossible, however.

Imagine that (a) is the case. If that’s true, then are you REALLY imagining the GREATEST possible being? No. For, surely you can imagine one that is even greater still—namely, one that exists both in your understanding AND in reality. If (a) were true, the being that you’re imagining would both be the greatest possible being AND NOT the greatest possible being—a contradiction. So, (a) is literally inconceivable.

If you think (a) is conceivable, then you’re confused. As Anselm says it, you’re a fool.

Since (a) is off the table, that leaves us with (b). But, then, the greatest possible being DOES exist in reality. And we call that being ‘God’.

The Argument, Formalized: Here’s the argument explicitly laid out.

Let ‘X’ refer to ‘That than which no greater can be thought’.

1. X exists in your understanding.
2. Either: (a) X exists ONLY in your understanding, and NOT in reality, or
   (b) X exists BOTH in your understanding AND in reality.
3. (a) is not the case; it is self-contradictory.

   Reasoning: To imagine X is to imagine ‘that than which nothing greater can be thought’. But, to imagine such a being FAILING to exist in reality is to imagine a being, something greater than which CAN be thought (since a being which has all of the same properties as the one you’re imagining PLUS the property of actually existing in reality would be GREATER than the one you’re imagining). So, to imagine (a) is self-contradictory, and therefore impossible.

4. Therefore, (b) is the case. That is, ‘that than which no greater can be thought’ exists in reality—and we call it God.
What Atheists Do: So, how are there even atheists? Surely I can SAY ‘God does not exist’ without contradiction. Anselm disagrees. Sure, you can UTTER those words, or write them, etc. But, if that’s ALL you do, then this is merely “to think the word that signifies that thing [i.e., God].” (*Proslogion*, 4). On the other hand, if you truly “understand what the thing [i.e., God] is”, then it is incoherent to say that God does not exist.

For instance, imagine someone who says, “Triangles do not have three sides.” Sure, this person can UTTER those words—but if they truly UNDERSTOOD them, they would realize that what they are saying is incoherent.

Gaunilo’s Criticisms: Gaunilo of Marmoutiers (994-1083 AD) wrote a reply to Anselm on behalf of the fool (c.1078, shortly after the *Proslogion* was written). Anselm personally requested that his *Proslogion* always be studied alongside his exchange with Gaunilo.

1. Denial of P1: I Have No Understanding of God: If you tell me to imagine a man that I do not know, I will at least partially be able to do so. I can do this because I’ve OBSERVED men, and I can base the man that I’m imagining on my knowledge of the genus and species that he is a member of. For instance, I will imagine a living thing that is a mammal, hominid, etc. And this man will exist in my understanding (imagination).

But, I’ve never observed any god. I do not know anything about God’s genus or species. I cannot even imagine things that I know about and speculate that God is SIMILAR to those things, since Anselm himself admits that God is SO great that He is unlike everything else. In short, I do NOT have understanding of “that than which no greater can be thought”, so P1 is false.

Anselm’s Reply: Anselm replies [in 1 & 8-9] that we CAN understand “that than which no greater can be thought”. We DO understand what it is for something to be GOOD. We also understand what it is for there to be “greater” and “lesser” goods. For God, we simply ask, for every good that we can conceive of, is it better to have that property or not have it? If it’s better to have it, then God has it—and has it perfectly.

Second, we DO understand the concept of a thing that is, e.g., *ineffable* or *unthinkable*. Sure, we do not have any understanding of the REFERENT of those terms (i.e., the THING itself). But, that is not required. We at least know what SORT of thing we’re referring to.

Finally, in order to deny that “that than which no greater can be thought” exists, one must have some understanding of what they’re saying, right? But, then, a PART of what they’re stating involves the concept of “that than which...”. So, in the very act of DENYING that X exists, you must have at least SOME understanding of what X is! Boom!
2. Denial of P3: Denying God’s Existence is Only a Contradiction if I Already Know That God DOES Exist: Echoing Augustine, Gaunilo writes, “I know with absolute certainty that I myself exist.” So, is it coherent to deny my own existence?

• If it IS coherent to deny the existence of something that I know for certain exists, then it is also coherent to deny God’s existence, even if I know for certain that He does exist—in which case P3 is false: claiming (a) is not self-contradictory.

• If it is NOT coherent to deny my own existence, then God is NOT the only being who “cannot be thought not to exist” (i.e., He is not the only being for whom a contradiction follows if you deny its existence). This is contrary to Anselm’s claim that God is unique in this way. Furthermore, the contradiction only follows if I ALREADY know independently that I exist with certainty. So, similarly, it should only be contradictory to deny God’s existence if I ALREADY KNEW that God existed (i.e., some independent proof first convinced me that God exists).

Anselm’s Reply: Anselm agrees that if you already UNDERSTAND (i.e., know) that something exists, then you cannot coherently, simultaneously understand that this thing does NOT exist. However, consider the case of your own existence. Even if you know for certain that you do exist, you can at least IMAGINE a case where you don’t exist. That’s easy. For instance, imagine that your parents never met, or never had children.

But, God IS unique in this respect: For Anselm has argued that it’s not even coherent to THINK (i.e., IMAGINE) that ‘that than which no greater can be thought’ does not exist. In section 3 of his reply, Anselm even offers another version of the argument:

1. The fool thinks, “X does not exist.”
2. The ‘X’ that the fool is referring to is either:
   (a) that than which no greater can be thought, or
   (b) it is not.
3. If (b), then the fool has not denied the existence of ‘that than which no greater can be thought’.
4. If (a), then the fool is “imagining” a contradiction, which is impossible.

   Reasoning: The fool is trying to imagine that ‘that than which no greater can be thought’ is simultaneously ‘that than which a greater CAN be thought’, since a being which has all of the same properties as the one imagined PLUS the property of actually existing in reality would be greater than the one being imagined.

5. Therefore, it is impossible to coherently even THINK that ‘that than which no greater can be thought’ does not exist.
Reductio: The Lost Island: Gaunilo’s most damaging criticism begins by asking us to imagine a perfect island: ‘The Lost Island’. It has the perfect beaches, perfect weather, perfect restaurants, and so on. In fact, no greater island can even be imagined. But, then, using Anselm’s reasoning, such an island would have to exist in reality! Gaunilo constructs an argument which runs exactly parallel to Anselm’s, and looks like this:
Let ‘X’ refer to ‘An island than which no greater island can be thought’.

1. X exists in your understanding.
2. Either: (a) X exists ONLY in your understanding, and NOT in reality, or (b) X exists BOTH in your understanding AND in reality.
3. (a) is not the case; it is self-contradictory.
   
   **Reasoning:** To imagine X is to imagine ‘an island than which no greater island can be thought’. But, to imagine such an island FAILING to exist in reality is to imagine an island than which a greater island CAN be thought (since an island which has all of the same properties as the one you’re imagining PLUS the property of actually existing in reality would be greater than the one you’re imagining). So, to imagine (a) is self-contradictory, and therefore impossible.

4. Therefore, (b) is the case. That is, The Lost Island exists in reality.

[What’s worse, similar arguments can be constructed for The Lost Pizza, The Lost Pencil, The Lost Toilet, and so on!]

The above style of objection is known as ‘reductio ad absurdum’. Literally, you take an argument and reduce it to absurdity. You do this by showing that, by using exactly the same line of reasoning, you can “prove” something that is clearly false. Therefore, there must be something wrong with that line of reasoning. (Though, note that a ‘reductio’ does not pinpoint exactly WHERE an argument goes wrong—it just shows us that it must have gone wrong SOMEWHERE.)

Anselm’s Reply: Anselm believes it is NOT a contradiction to imagine a thing with any of the following properties as failing to exist:

- It exists “somewhere and sometimes”, but not “everywhere and always”.

   If something does not exist in some particular place, or at some particular time, then we can automatically imagine it not existing at all.

   Look at your hand. Now, look over there where your hand isn’t. Now, imagine that the place you’re looking at is ALL that exists. Well, your hand isn’t in that place, so clearly you can coherently imagine a world where your hand doesn’t exist.
Now, think about the time before your birth. You didn’t exist then. Now imagine that the universe ENDED then. Well, you weren’t in that universe, so clearly you can coherently imagine a world where you never existed. Anselm writes,

“If something does not exist everywhere and always, even if perhaps it does exist somewhere and sometimes, it can undoubtedly be thought not to exist anywhere or at any time ... For something that did not exist yesterday but does exist today can be conceived of as never existing [at all] in just the same way that it is understood as not existing yesterday. And something that does not exist here but does exist elsewhere can be thought not to exist anywhere in just the same way that it does not exist here.” (Reply, section 1)

- It has parts that do not extend across ALL of space and time.

Even if we imagine a being that exists as spread out across ALL places, and at ALL times, Anselm argues that it is not a contradiction to imagine it failing to exist.

For instance, imagine the universe itself. In every place, and at every time, the universe exists. However, the universe has PARTS—and not all of the parts exist at all places and all times. But, then, look at the Andromeda galaxy. Now look over there, where the Andromeda galaxy isn’t. It is coherent to imagine the universe lacking this PART. However, this is true of each and every individual part. And, Anselm thinks, if it is coherent to imagine each and every PART of something failing to exist, then it is coherent to imagine the ENTIRE THING failing to exist.

The same sort of thought experiment can be run for times as well. For instance, for the first billion years of time, none of the later (temporal) parts of the universe existed. It is coherent to imagine each individual time segment as failing to exist at other times because they DO IN FACT fail to exist at other times. And, since this is true of each temporal part, it follows that it is coherent to imagine the universe existing at ALL times. Anselm concludes,

“Therefore, whatever does not exist as a whole in all places and at all times, even if it does exist, can be thought not to exist.”

Later (in section 4 of his reply to Gaunilo), Anselm elaborates:

“[E]verything can be thought not to exist, except for that which exists supremely. Indeed, all and only those things that have a beginning or end, or are made up of parts, as well as whatever does not exist always and everywhere as a whole ... can be thought not to exist. The only thing that
cannot be thought not to exist is that which has neither beginning nor end, and is not made up of parts, and which no thought discerns except as wholly present always and everywhere."

Clearly, no island fits this description. So, one CAN coherently imagine The Lost Island as failing to exist, without contradiction.

Think about what sort of being DOES fit this description: It would have to exist at ALL times, and in ALL places—and not just some PART of it in each time and place, but the WHOLE, ENTIRE being exists in EVERY place; and the WHOLE, ENTIRE being exists at EVERY time. There is no time or place where any part of this being fails to exist. (Not to mention, such a being would not even have PARTS at all!) Such a being, by its very nature, could not fail to exist. Later we will learn to call this sort of entity a necessary being.

[Further Speculation on The Lost Island: Perhaps we could deny P1 of the Lost Island argument? Perhaps the greatest conceivable BEING is a coherent concept, but the greatest conceivable ISLAND is not. For instance, what is the perfect number of banana trees?]

[There is Only One Supreme Being: Note also that Anselm believed that it was only possible for there to be ONE such being. In Monologion, chapter 4, he says roughly this: If there were TWO such beings, they would have to differ. But, in order to differ, one of them would have to have a trait that the other lacked. If it is BETTER to have this trait, then the one that HAS it is the true God. If it is WORSE, then the one that lacks it is the true God.]