The Ontological Argument

From the *Proslogion*, by Anselm, Bishop of Canterbury

c. 1077
Anselm’s *A priori* Argument for the Existence of God

• Today we will look at Anselm’s “Ontological” Argument for the existence of God. This is an *a priori* argument for the existence of God.

• Anselm claims that we can prove the existence of God, without any evidence from experience, simply by understanding the *concept* of “God.”
A priori / A posteriori knowledge Review
A priori vs. A posteriori knowledge

• The distinction concerns how we know that some statement is true.
  — Not how we came to believe it, but the kind of justification we provide to establish its truth.

• If we must appeal to sense experience (perception, observation, etc.) to establish truth, this is a posteriori knowledge.

• If we can establish truth without sense experience, this is a priori knowledge.
• **Examples:**
  
  – $17 + 17 = 34$ (And all mathematical truths in general.)
  
  – “All bachelors are male” is an *a priori* truth.

  • Of course, I had to learn the meaning of “bachelor.” But that is not the point. To **justify** my belief in the truth of this statement, I do not need to conduct any experiment or observation. Since it is true by definition, no sense experience could disprove it.

  – “All the men here today are bachelors” is an *a posteriori* statement.

  • I could not **justify** my belief in its truth without experiment or observation.
A priori vs. A posteriori Arguments

• An argument is *a priori* if all of its premises are *a priori*, i.e., if their truth can be established without appeal to sense experience.

• An argument is *a posteriori* if at least one of its premises is *a posteriori*, i.e., if the truth of at least one premise can be established only by appeal to sense experience.
A priori vs. A posteriori Arguments

• Who cares?

• Since *a priori* arguments do not rely on sense experience to establish the truth of any of their premises, *they cannot be refuted by any kind of perception or observation*.

• *A priori* arguments are “conceptual” arguments, and so are independent of sense experience.
A priori vs. A posteriori Arguments

• Who cares?

• Anselm claims that we can prove the existence of God without any evidence from experience, but simply by understanding the concept of “God.”

• If successful, this argument would be irrefutable by any kind of empirical evidence, as it doesn’t rely upon sense experience in any way.
Anselm’s “Ontological Argument”

An a priori argument for the existence of God.
Anselm’s conception of God:

• First: What is your conception of God?
  – Put this aside; that is, even if you have a different understanding of “God,” does Anselm’s argument work for his understanding?

• Anselm: A being than which none greater can be conceived …
  – that is, a being such that one cannot conceive (or think) of anything greater.
“The Fool”

• “The Fool has said in his heart, there is no God.”

  – Anselm is talking about the atheist. The atheist denies the existence of God, but must understand what he is denying.

  – So, to deny that something exists is to claim that this thing exits only “in the understanding,” and not “in reality” as well.

  – Atheism, then, is the claim that God (or, for Anselm, a being than which none greater can be conceived) exists only in the understanding, but not also “in reality.”
Existence in the Understanding

• Anselm claims that, even for the atheist, God exists in the understanding.

• For Anselm, a thing exists in the understanding if we understand what it would mean for that thing to exist in reality—if we understand the concept.
  – So, Santa Claus exists (only) in the understanding.

• Atheism claims that God exists only in the understanding (and not in reality as well.) This is what Anselm seeks to disprove.
Greatness-making properties:

• Anselm’s concept of God: a being such that none greater can be conceived.
  – Not merely the greatest being you or I could conceive of, but a being such that none greater is even possible.

• But what does it mean to say that one being is or isn’t “greater” than another?
  – What makes a being “great?” What are “greatness-making properties?”

• Anselm: “I do not mean physically great, but … better … or … more worthy.”
Anselm: Existence ("in reality") is a greatness-making property.

- This means that, for any given thing, that thing has more "greatness" if it exists (i.e., if it "exists in reality") than if it doesn’t (i.e., if it exists only "in the understanding").
  - $20 in your pocket beats $20 in your imagination!
- If God is a being than which none greater can be conceived, could such a being exist only in the understanding, and not in reality?
  - Anselm: This is absurd—i.e., a contradiction.
Anselm’s Argument
(in a nutshell)

• **Claim:** A being than which none greater can be conceived exists *necessarily*, i.e., its non-existence is *impossible*, because denying its existence involves a contradiction.

• **Reasoning:** To say that a being than which none greater can be conceived exists *only* in the understanding is to say that *it* would be greater if it existed in reality as well, which means that *it* (a being than which none greater can be conceived) is such that I can conceive of a greater being (the being it would be if existed in reality as well). And this is contradictory, and so impossible.
Anselm’s Argument:

• 1. A being than which a greater is not possible exists in the understanding.
   – that is, such a being can be thought of.

• 2. If something exists only in the understanding, then it might have been greater than it is.
   – i.e., if it also existed in reality.

• 3. Suppose (for reductio) that a being than which a greater is not possible exists only in the understanding (i.e., and not also in reality)
   – that is, suppose there is no such being.
Anselm’s Argument (Cont.):

4. Then (from 2 and 3) a being than which a greater is not possible might have been greater than it is.

5. So (from 4) a being than which a greater is not possible is a being than which a greater is possible.
   — (This is a contradiction, which means it’s impossible.)

6. So (from 5) premise 3 (the assumption for reductio) must be rejected, i.e., it must be false that a being than which a greater is not possible exists only in the understanding and not in reality as well.
   — that is, such a being must exist.
Anselm’s Argument (cont.):

• 7. But, \( \text{God} =_{\text{def.}} \) a being than which a greater is not possible.

• 8. So (from 6 and 7), God must exist in reality as well as in the understanding—it is impossible that God not exist.
“On Behalf of the Fool”
Gaunilo’s Challenge to Anselm
Gaunilo’s Strategy:

• Gaunilo can’t say exactly where Anselm’s argument goes wrong. (Like Anselm, Gaunilo believes in God. Gaunilo simply rejects Anselm’s argument for this belief.)

• Gaunilo thinks the argument “proves too much,” i.e., that if it works regarding “God,” then it must also work for any concept whatsoever. But, since it obviously doesn’t work for any concept whatsoever, it must not work in the case of God either.
Gaunilo (in a nutshell)

• Anselm argues that it is impossible that a being than which none greater can be conceived exists only in the understanding, and not in reality as well.
• Gaunilo argues that if Anselm’s reasoning were correct, it would also show that an island than which none greater can be conceived must also exist in reality.
• But clearly there is no such island. So something in Anselm’s reasoning must be faulty. Anselm’s argument must not be valid.
Gaunillo’s Strategy

If Anselm’s argument worked here …

• To say that a being than which none greater can be conceived exists only in the understanding is to say that it would be greater if it existed in reality as well, which means that it (a being than which none greater can be conceived) is such that I can conceive of a greater being (the being it would be if existed in reality as well). This is impossible, so this being must exist.

It should (but doesn’t) also work here.

• To say that an island than which none greater can be conceived exists only in the understanding is to say that it would be greater if it existed in reality as well, which means that it (an island than which none greater can be conceived) is such that I can conceive of a greater island (the island it would be if existed in reality as well). This is impossible, so this island must exist.—BUT IT DOESN’T.
On Behalf of the Fool

• 1. An island than which a greater is not possible exists in the understanding.
• 2. If something exists only in the understanding, then it might have been greater than it is.
• 3. Suppose (for reductio) that an island than which a greater is possible exists only in the understanding (i.e., and not also in reality).
On Behalf of the Fool (cont.)

• 4. Then (from 2 and 3) an island than which a greater is possible might have been greater than it is.
• 5. I.e., an island than which a greater is not possible is an island than which a greater is possible. (This is a contradiction.)
• 6. So (from 5) 3 (the assumption for reductio) must be rejected, i.e., it must be false that an island than which a greater is not possible exists only in the understanding, and not in reality as well.
On Behalf of the Fool (cont.)

• 7. Consequently, that island than which a greater is not possible cannot *not* exist in reality.

• 8. That is, that island than which none greater is possible **must actually exist**.

• *Oh really*?!
Gaunilo

• If Anselm’s argument were *valid*, then if it worked for “that being such that none greater is possible,” it must also work for “that island such that none greater is possible.”

• But, it doesn’t work for “that island such that none greater is possible.”

• So, the argument is not valid.