Anselm Review

God as a Being than which none greater can be thought
GOD AND PERFECTION:
Anselm’s God

• Before we can debate the existence of God, we must have a precise concept of the kind of being we are debating about.

• For Anselm, when we talk about “God,” we are talking about a “being-than-which-none-greater-can-be-conceived.”

• – I.e., a fully perfect being that lacks nothing.
“Greatness”

• There is a long history of discussion (among philosophers and theologians) about what it means for one being to be more or less “great” or “perfect” than another.
• For Anselm, existence is a “greatness making” property.
  – If a thing lacks existence, it lacks something, and so isn’t as great or as perfect as we could imagine.
Anselm’s Argument
(in a nutshell)

• **Claim**: A being than-which-none-greater-can-be-thought *must* exist, because denying its existence involves a contradiction.

• **Reasoning**: To say that a being than-which-none-greater-can-be-thought exists *only* in the understanding is to say that *it* would be greater if it existed in reality as well. If so, then it (i.e., a being than-which-none-greater-can-be-thought) is a being that-than-which-a-greater-*can*-be-thought. And this is a contradiction, which is impossible.
  
  – I.e., it is *impossible* that this being *not* exist.
GAUNILO’S CHALLENGE:
Gaunilo’s Claim

• If Anselm’s argument works for a being than-which-none-greater-can-be-conceived, it must also work for an island than-which-none-greater-can-be-conceived.

• But it does not work for an island ....
  — Clearly, there is no existing island that we can’t imagine being greater.

• So the argument does not work for “God” either.
Gaunilo’s Strategy:

• Gaunilo, like Anselm, believes in God. But he argues that Anselm’s attempt to prove this fails.
• Gaunilo can’t say exactly where Anselm’s argument goes wrong.
• He reasons that if Anselm’s argument succeeded, it would also prove the existence of many other things, things we know do not in fact exist.
  – And if it does not work in the other cases, it cannot work in the case of God.