

SAINT ANSELM AND GAUNILO ON THE EXISTENCE OF GOD*

P. Alpár GERGELY¹

ABSTRACT. The best-known version of the ontological argument was formulated by Saint Anselm of Canterbury. With his argument Anselm tried to prove the existence of God. In my paper I restate all the propositions of Anselm's argument, and also present Gaunilo's counter-arguments. Finally, I raise some problems that further analysis of the argument could benefit from.

Keywords: Saint Anselm, Gaunilo, existence, God, ontological argument

Saint Anselm and Gaunilo on the Existence of God

In my short paper I will attempt to formulate and present the claims of the argument known in the history of philosophy as the ontological argument. After formulating the claims of the ontological argument, I will present some criticism of the argument, which were raised against the ontological argument at the time of its formulation. After that, I will make some observations on the argument, along which the question is worth further reflection.

The ontological argument was first formulated by Saint Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm formulated the argument in chapters 2 and 3 of his work *Proslogion*.² Some say that the argument presented in the two chapters are two different arguments, others say that the very same argument is presented in chapter 3 also. This question

* This paper is a translation of an article written originally in Hungarian. The original title is "Szent Anselm és Gaunilo Isten létezéséről". The original article was published in *Erdélyi Múzeum*, 2022/4, 1–8.

¹ Senior lecturer PhD, Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Email: alpar.gergely@ubbcluj.ro.

² Cf. The relevant extract of St. Anselm's *Proslogion* in Plantinga, Alvin (ed.), *The Ontological Argument*, Macmillan, 1968, 3–5.



is irrelevant here, however for the sake of simplicity I will refer to the arguments as the first and second one. Let us see St. Anselm's argument for the existence of God presented in chapter 2 of the *Proslogion*. St. Anselm states the following:

- (1) God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.
- (2) The fool says in his heart, 'there is no God'.
- (3) When the fool hears the phrase 'than which nothing greater can be conceived', he understands what he hears.
- (4) That which the fool understands is present in his understanding, even if he does not admit that it exists.
- (5) That which is present in the understanding and that which exists are two different things; they are not identical.
- (6) Before the painter paints a picture, the picture already exists in the painter's understanding, but he does not yet perceive it as a real being.
- (7) After the painter has painted the picture, the picture exists in the painter's understanding, and it also exists in reality because the painter knows he has painted it.
- (8) The fool knows that something than which nothing greater can be conceived exists at least in his understanding. (That than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the fool's understanding, because when the fool hears this expression he understands it, and the thing that we understand is in our understanding.)
- (9) It is not possible that than which nothing greater can be conceived should be found only in our understanding.
- (10) If that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists only in the understanding, it is conceivable that it also exists in reality.
- (11) That which exists in reality (not only in the understanding) is greater than that which exists only in the understanding.
- (12) If that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists only in the understanding, then that than which nothing greater can be conceived is also something than which something greater can be conceived. (This is a contradiction.)
- (13) It is not possible for something than which nothing greater can be conceived to be something than which something greater can be conceived.
- (14) That than which nothing greater can be conceived (without any doubt) exists both in the understanding and in reality.

In contrast to chapter 2, in chapter 3 of the *Proslogion* Anselm proves the existence of God by proving the impossibility of his non-existence. Here too, let us list the arguments in detail!

(1) That thing (than which nothing greater can be conceived) is so real that its non-existence cannot be conceived.

(2) It is conceivable that something exists of which non-existence cannot be conceived.

(3) Tacit claim: something of which non-existence cannot be conceived can be conceived.

(4) Something of which non-existence cannot be conceived is greater than something of which non-existence can be conceived.

(5) If non-existence could be conceived of something of which non-existence could not be conceived, then that would not be something than which nothing greater can be conceived. (This is a contradiction.)

(6) That than which nothing greater can be conceived is so real that its non-existence cannot be conceived.

Here are some comments and criticisms of Saint Anselm's arguments. Let us begin by questioning one of the arguments presented in chapter 3 of the *Proslogion*. The argument was formulated by Anselm's fellow monk, Gaunilo in his treatise *On Behalf of the Fool*. Before presenting it, it is worth noting that Gaunilo, like Anselm, was himself a Christian, who believed in the existence of God, and thus did not criticise Anselm's arguments out of conviction, but merely pointed out the logical flaws in the ontological argument and drew attention on its weakness. The conclusion of St. Anselm's second argument, a thesis that needs to be proved, is stated at the very beginning of the argument: 'And it assuredly exists [God] so truly, that it cannot be conceived not to exist.'³ According to Anselm, the existence of God is so real that it is inconceivable that God does not exist. So be it, says Gaunilo; if this is so, then it is inconceivable why Anselm should bother to prove the existence of God at all. For, if the non-existence of God cannot be conceived, it would not be conceivable to the fool either. And if the non-existence of God were not conceivable for the fool, then it would not even occur to him to question the existence of God, in which case there would be no need for Anselm's ontological argument: because it would be clear to everyone that God exists.⁴ The moment the question of God's existence arises, however, we cannot claim that we cannot conceive of God's non-existence. We can conceive it. In fact, it is not only the fool who can conceive the non-existence of God, and who says in his heart that 'there is no God', but also Gaunilo himself. Therefore, Anselm is not right when he says of God that his non-existence cannot be conceived.

³ Ibid. 5.

⁴ Cf. Gaunilo's *In Behalf of the Fool* in Plantinga, Alvin (ed.), *The Ontological Argument*, Macmillan, 1968, 8.

In the history of philosophy, the argument of Saint Anselm, as presented in chapter 3 of the *Proslogion*, has reappeared again and again at different times. Gyula Klima reports in one of his studies that an argument very similar to that of Anselm was formulated by Descartes.⁵ Descartes, of course, was unaware of this, and one of Descartes' debating partners, a certain priest named Caterus, merely pointed out to Descartes that Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* makes a very similar point: that God is such a perfect being that his perfection implies existence, so that God cannot be thought not to exist. But with this remark we return to Anselm's first ontological argument, and we also find ourselves confronted with a host of problems.

St. Anselm assumes, and we have seen that later St. Thomas and Descartes also claimed, that the perfection of God implies the concept of existence. This means that whenever we deal with or think of the term 'God', we also think of existence, since existence is an essential property of God: if we think of God, we must also think of God's existence. But, as we have seen, this position is not universally accepted. Gaunilo, for example, disputes this: he says that it is possible to think of God without thinking of his existence.

But Gaunilo also disputes something else. On the first argument, he formulates the following objection: if we follow Anselm's idea, we must accept not only the existence of God, but also of other entities that are not empirically experienced, but are conceivable. Imagine, says Gaunilo, that some people tell us about an island, let us call it *the lost island*, which is impossible to find; no one inhabits it, but they claim that it is richer than any other land on earth. When we hear this, we understand what we are told without any difficulty. And by Anselm's logic, we should conclude that the island we have heard about really exists. Our reasoning would go as follows:

- (1) We understand what we are being told when someone talks about the lost island.
- (2) The lost island is the richest island in the world.
- (3) If the lost island existed only in our understanding, it could not be the richest island, for if it also existed in reality, it would be richer than the island existing only in our understanding.
- (4) But the lost island is the richest island.
- (5) To be the richest island, the lost island must exist in reality.
- (6) So the lost island exists in reality.

⁵ Klima Gyula, "Szent Anzelm és az ontológiai istenérv", in *Világosság*, Supplementary Volume to 12/1983, 5.

According to György Geréby, Gaunilo's argument can also be interpreted as saying that Saint Anselm's argument is wrong, because it proves the real existence of fictional entities. Geréby, however, argues that this is not the case, but that the argument is too good, and thus 'cannot stop at proving the real existence of God.'⁶

And, indeed, Anselm's argument would lead to a proliferation of entities in our world. One might even say, perhaps, that the argument is so good that it is bad; but it is bad precisely because it cannot limit the postulation of fictional entities as real ones. Geréby says that the argument is based on a pattern. And this pattern shows us that if we can identify an individual object within a given set for which we say that there is no greater/richer/etc. among the conceivable things, then we must accept its real existence with respect to this thing. Thus, our world will be populated by richest islands, best mashed zucchinis, wooden shoes, bogeymen, etc.⁷

There is another aspect of Anselm's first argument which is worth examining, and which Gaunilo has also reflected on. Gaunilo distinguishes between the mere existence of a thing in the understanding and the existence of the same thing in reality; and in his view, Anselm makes the mistake in the first argument of inferring from the existence of a thing in the understanding to the existence of that thing in reality. He thinks this is wrong. If this were so, then we should accept the real existence of the lost island. But not only that; we should also accept the real existence of any other thing that is present in our understanding: the real existence of perfect elephants speaking in human language, the real existence of perfect unicorns, etc. For, if we hear about these entities, we understand the terms, and if we understand the terms, these entities are in our understanding. But if they were only in our understanding, they could not be the best; however, since we have said that they are the best, they must exist in reality.

But Gaunilo disagrees with this argument. He disagrees with this argument precisely because he takes it seriously that if an entity were to exist only in his understanding, it couldn't be the greatest/best/etc. If it were, he says, then the entity that exists in reality would be smaller or lesser than that which exists in his understanding. And this is impossible. It is precisely the case, Gaunilo argues, that first we must be convinced that a thing exists in reality, and only then can we assert that something greater than that does not exist. In Gaunilo's thinking, the reality of things takes precedence over the assertion that nothing greater than them is possible. To illustrate Gaunilo's idea with an example: we can say that the pencil with which I am writing is in my understanding as the greatest pencil (with which I am writing) because this

⁶ Geréby György, "Amit Anselmus és Gaunilo mondtak egymásnak", in *Magyar Filozófiai Szemle*, 6/1996, 659.

⁷ *Ibid.* 659.

pencil exists in reality (and, if you like, in the sense that I am writing with it, it has no greater degree of existence than its actual existence). The very reality of this pencil, and the fact that I am writing with it, leads me to think of this pencil (in terms of its degree of existence) as the greatest/best pencil in my understanding that I am writing with. And it is not because there is no pencil greater than this pencil in my understanding with which I am writing that this pencil must exist in reality. And now, applying this idea onto the existence of God: it seems that Gaunilo is saying that Anselm can claim that God is that than nothing greater can be conceived because for Anselm, God exists in reality. This is why Anselm claims that it is not possible to conceive non-existence about God. But for a person who does not have the same basic thesis as Anselm does, i.e. that 'God exists', the non-existence of God is conceivable, and, to that extent, questionable. The question is, then, does God exist in reality? Or: does God really exist?

Far be it from me to accuse St. Anselm of anything, but it seems to me that his first argument is a case of the *petitio principii* fallacy, but even if it is not, it bears a strong resemblance to it. Accordingly, the argument seems circular. On the one hand, Anselm is convinced that God exists in reality – and in this respect satisfies the requirement of Gaunilo that we must first be convinced of the real existence of a thing and only then can we assert that no greater thing than that is conceivable; and on the other hand, he claims that since this thing is that than which nothing greater can be conceived, it therefore exists, or must exist. If we do not take into consideration the thing that is in the understanding, we can rephrase Anselm's argument as follows: God exists in reality (premise), therefore God exists in reality, or: God really exists. This is a tautology. Or we can say: God really exists (starting point), therefore God must exist. This is partly a noninformative statement like the first one, and partly a stronger statement. For the conclusion does not merely state a factual situation as it stands, but implies that it could not be otherwise. This would be a strong modal reading of the conclusion; at the same time, it would highlight why, in the case of the second argument, Anselm claims that the non-existence of God is inconceivable.

Of course, the problem is not that simple. It is quite easy to construct examples where we would be reluctant to say that the existence of a thing is necessary, regardless of the fact that the thing actually exists. It trivially follows from the fact that my pencil (actually) exists that my pencil (actually) exists, but we would be reluctant to conclude from the fact that my pencil (actually) exists that my pencil must exist, by which we mean that the existence of my pencil is necessary, or: the non-existence of it is inconceivable. Few of us think that we could not imagine a world in which my pencil does not (actually) exist. Not so with God, say some philosophers. We have

seen that Saint Anselm claimed that the non-existence of God is inconceivable. But a very similar argument was made by Descartes, when he argued that existence cannot be separated from God. Existence belongs to God just as necessarily as it is necessary that the sum of the three angles of a triangle is equal to the sum of two right angles. Just as it is an essential property of a triangle that the sum of its three angles is equal to the sum of two right angles, so it is an essential property of God that he exists: for the concept of a perfect being includes existence as a property.⁸ Immanuel Kant, however, analysing the ontological argument, formulated and advocated the position that existence is not a real predicate.⁹

Kant argues that the idea of God, which reason seems to need, in no way proves that the being corresponding to the idea exists in reality. (It is worth emphasizing here the similarity of Kant's idea to that formulated by Gaunilo, i.e. that the existence of a thing in the understanding does not entail the existence of that thing in reality.) It does, of course, if we take existence as a predicate. But according to Kant, this is precisely where Descartes and Leibniz, and all the other philosophers – including St. Anselm, the one who formulated the ontological argument for the first time – were wrong. Those philosophers who thought that existence, like every other property of a thing, was a predicate, were wrong. If that were the case, then those with whom Kant takes issue would be right: for these thinkers claim that we would be contradicting ourselves if we denied the existence of God, that is, if we asserted that 'God does not exist'. The root of the contradiction, says Kant, is that if we were to think of existence as part of the concept of God, as a property, then whenever we uttered that 'God does not exist' we would in fact be saying, 'God, who exists, does not exist', which is like saying that a triangle does not have three angles. For in case of both statements we find that the subject of the statement contradicts the predicate.

Except, that existential propositions, or existential statements do not have a subject–predicate structure. If they did, no predicate of any existential proposition would say anything about the subject of the proposition that we would have not thought of in conjunction with the subject. To put the point in Kantian terms: existential propositions would be analytic judgments;¹⁰ to put it in more modern terms, we might say that existential propositions would be referential tautologies. If this were so, the statements denying existence would be referential contradictions.¹¹

⁸ Cf. Altrichter Ferenc, "Fogalom és lét: logikai út Istenhez?", in Altrichter Ferenc, *Észérvek az európai filozófiai hagyományban*, Atlantisz, 1993, 36.

⁹ Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, 563–569. (B 620 – B 630.)

¹⁰ Kant, Immanuel, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 16.

¹¹ Klima Gyula, "Szent Anzelm és az ontológiai istenérv", in *Világosság*, Supplementary Volume to 12/1983, 5.

But this contradicts our experience. The argument is that if existential propositions were referential tautologies, this would mean that these claims must always be true, but we would like to think that our existential propositions can be sometimes true and sometimes false: for example, if we stated that 'Australia exists'. It is true that Australia exists, but it could also be the case that it does not exist, just as there is a similar case if we claim that 'Atlantis exists'.

From all these aspects, Kant concludes that statements asserting existence are synthetic; which means that if we assert the existence of some individual thing, we must justify the truth of the assertion on the basis of possible experience. By applying this Kantian point to Anselm's argument, we get that in order to assert the existence of God, we must first be able to justify it on the basis of experience. I think both Gaunilo and the fool would agree with this: if we could prove God's existence by experience, then we could rightly say God exists.

In one case, the error of reasoning proving the existence of God, lays in inferring from the existence of a thing in the understanding that the thing really existed. As Kant pointed out, however, there is another case of error, which seems to be justified by the development of modern logic. The error in this case lies in inferring the necessity of things from the necessity of propositions. Of course, even in this case, we assume that God exists, and then conclude that God must necessarily exist. In a sense, the statements 'The triangle has three angles' and 'God exists' are very similar. If we take both statements to be analytic judgments, then the subject of both statements already implies the predicate, so that 'triangle' implies that the given shape has three angles, and 'God' implies that the being exists. Nevertheless – however strange it may sound –, in neither version of the examples are we committed to the real existence of the triangle or the real existence of God.

In this case, Kant is talking about conditional necessity: he says that the absolute necessity of propositions in relation to things and predicates of things implies only conditional necessity. The examples in these cases would be: 'If triangles existed, they would necessarily have three angles', and 'If God existed, he would necessarily have to have existence as a property.' Thus, even if in the case of God existence as a property of God were a real predicate (which Kant has shown it is not), existence would not be an absolute necessary property of God, since the existence of this potentially absolute property would be conditional on the actual existence of the subject. Which is absurd, of course, since our task is precisely to prove that God exists in reality. I don't think it would be difficult for the fool to accept a statement that says that if God really existed, he would necessarily have the property of existence. I think he would have no difficulty accepting the statement in question, because in

the context of the real world, the failure of the only condition, i.e., the real existence of God, would render the further implications of the statement irrelevant, since it would be a counterfactual statement.

It is a common view in classical logic that, in the case of universal propositions, we do not necessarily think that the entities we name by the referring expression – which would roughly correspond to the subject term in classical logic – exist. Thus, if we assert that ‘Every triangle has three angles’, we do not take it for granted that triangles exist. This of course leads to oddities. For example, since we assume that the statements we utter are true, therefore if one wants to prove that we are not right when we say ‘All triangles have three angles’ one must show that a particular triangle does not have three angles. But he will be unable to do so. Since we have not established that there are triangles, our interlocutor will not find a single triangle in the universe of discourse, i.e. the set of things assumed or implied in the discussion, that he can show does not have three angles. He will therefore not find a single counterexample to our statement. But the burden of proof is on him; and since he cannot prove that we are not right, we assume that we are right. To use the analogy of triangles, this phenomenon is perhaps not so surprising, since we assume that everyone intuitively believes that triangles exist. But if we were to say something about pink centaurs or talking trees, the problem would be immediately obvious. In short, on the basis of the idea just presented, whatever we claim about fictional entities would be true, since they could not be disproved.

The situation of existential statements is very similar to that of universal statements, despite the fact that in the case of existential statements the quantifier in the statement is read as ‘there is such a...’ or ‘there is at least one such...’. Yet the situation is similar because, in the case of these statements, we are not committed to the real existence of the things in question. We only make ourselves look like committing to the real existence of certain entities, but this is not the case. To claim that ‘The pink centaur flies’ does not mean that we believe that there is at least one pink centaur, nor do we have to believe in the existence of talking trees to claim ‘The talking tree is sometimes sad’.

In the history of logic and philosophy one of the most famous examples of existential statements is Bertrand Russell’s statement ‘The present king of France is bald’. But even in the Frege–Russell–Strawson debate, the debate was not about whether the present king of France existed in reality. Everyone accepted that he did not exist because they knew he did not exist; they did not believe he did.

But St. Anselm and Gaunilo, who held the position of the fool, do not agree on the existence of God. Anselm believes that God exists, which is why he cannot pretend its contrary; he cannot even imagine the possibility of God’s nonexistence. Gaunilo, on the other hand, representing the fool’s position, claims only that if he

understands the expression ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’, he can conceive of this being. At the same time, however, he believes that there is an unbridgeable gulf between imagination and reality, so that imagination has no necessary consequences as regards reality and things that really exist.

Of course, one could argue – as is the solution of classical logic to eliminate the oddities presented above – that our universe of discourse cannot be an empty set. We could therefore force ourselves to assume the existence of the things about which our statements are made, whether or not the entities in question exist in reality.

This would artificially eliminate the empty terms, but it would still not be enough to definitively prove the existence of God in reality. We would either assume the existence of God (‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’) ex hypothesis, that is independently of reality – however this would have no compelling force with regard to the real existence of God –, or we would take the existence of God to be real, but then the Anselmian attempt would become pointless. Either way, the solution would not be reassuring.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altrichter Ferenc, “Fogalom és lét: logikai út Istenhez?”, in Altrichter Ferenc, *Észérvek az európai filozófiai hagyományban*, Atlantisz, 1993, 27–47.
- Altrichter Ferenc, “Fogalom és lét: logikai zsákutca Istenhez?”, in Altrichter Ferenc, *Észérvek az európai filozófiai hagyományban*, Atlantisz, 1993, 49–7.
- Geréby György, “Amit Anselmus és Gaunilo mondtak egymásnak”, in *Magyar Filozófiai Szemle*, 6/1996, 651–663.
- Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Kant, Immanuel, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Klima Gyula, “Szent Anzelm és az ontológiai istenérv”, in *Világosság*, Supplementary Volume to 12/1983, 3–9.
- Plantinga, Alvin, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977.
- Plantinga, Alvin, *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Plantinga, Alvin, *The Ontological Argument*, Macmillan, 1968.