

Saint Anselm, "The Ontological Argument"

Reid Blackman

78-79 (also: Question 2, Article 1 of Aquinas's "Summa Theologica" on p. 80)

The goal: to prove that god exists *without appealing to any facts about the world*.

- This is an *a priori* argument (as opposed to an *a posteriori* argument)

Assumption: "We believe you [God] to be something than which nothing greater can be conceived."

- In other words: we can't think of anything greater than you; you're the best.
- What does Anselm mean by "greatest"?

Crucial distinction: (a) existing in the understanding vs. (b) existing in reality

As for (a): "When a painter plans out a painting, he has it in his understanding"; the painting exists in his understanding, but not in reality.

As for (b): "After he has painted it, he has the painting in his understanding, and – having produced it – he thinks that it exists" (and he is right to do so).

Claim: God exists in both the understanding and in reality.

Proof:

1. You can conceive of various things, some of which exist only in the understanding, others of which exist in both the understanding and in reality.
2. Something that exists in the understanding *and* exists in reality is greater than something that just exists in the understanding.
3. God is the greatest thing you can conceive.
4. Thus, God must exist both in the understanding and in reality.

Put differently:

1. Suppose God exists in the understanding only.
2. But you could conceive of God existing in the understanding and in reality.
3. Existing in both understanding and reality is greater than existing in just the understanding.
4. So you can conceive of something greater than God.
5. But this is impossible (it defies the definition of God).
6. Thus, God must exist in more than just the understanding – he has to exist in reality too.

An even stronger claim and argument: You can't even conceive of God not existing.

1. Something that can't be conceived not to exist is greater than something that can be conceived not to exist.
2. God is the greatest...
3. God can't be conceived not to exist.

Question: If we can't even conceive of God not to exist, *how am I doubting his existence?*

Reply:

Distinguish between two ways of conceiving: a) with words and b) what the thing itself is.

- We can conceive of God not existing in the first way, but not in the second.
- No one who understands what God is can conceive that He doesn't exist, even if he can say it.

Aquinas's objection to Anselm: What you need someone to grant is that "something in fact exists than which nothing greater can be thought," but no one who doubts God will grant you that.