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THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT: A proof for the existence of God

By

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The ontological argument, a proof for the existence of God, has fascinated a legion of thinkers, philosophers and theologians alike, for centuries.¹ For that matter, the argument has earned their respect and scorn. The source of such recognition lies with Saint Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury (1033–1109), who was responsible for perfecting a singular effort to prove by reason that which one already firmly believes by faith. The reason for such divergent interpretations of the ontological argument rests precisely in the disagreement among thinkers concerning the concepts of existence, essence, and necessity which this celebrated proof raises. The basis of disagreement is not so much a logical as a metaphysical one, and is a consequence of viewing the nature of being itself, its existence, and its relation to conceptual thinking in irreducibly different ways². This disagreement makes the evaluation of Anselm's argument anything but simple.

The primary purpose of this paper, then, is to understand what the ontological argument is and says.³ I shall specify the elements of the argument as formulated by Anselm and see the attractiveness of the argument within the problems which it and its critics raise. As such, the paper is divided under these headings: (1) what is the ontological argument; (2) what does Anselm's ontological argument say; (3) the issues of the ontological argument; and (4) the relevance of the ontological argument. I do not presume to give any more of a definitive solution than has been provided in the recent literature. I do make the following, more modest claim though. The Anselmian discovery, an embodiment of a philosophy in which essence

entails existence, continues to perplex and engage those who appreciate abstract reasoning by presenting a subtle rational ground for the subject of their faith which continues to be 'philosophically' unresolved.

I. *What is the Ontological Argument?*

An ontological proof for God is a rationalist deductive argument. Such an argument is understood within the rationalist theory of knowing, which would take seriously at least two assumptions: the priority of conception or thought over perception, and the primacy of logical order.⁴

Concerning the first assumption, percepts always deal with particulars. Images are rooted in sensuous intuitions, whereas concepts are meanings in intellectual intuitions. For a rationalist, like Descartes, there is a gap which needs to be bridged between conceiving and imagining. To imagine, that is, to have a mental picture of a circle is not necessarily to know its nature. Perception can never be a sufficient condition for knowledge. For a rationalist, furthermore, the priority of conception means that the mind is not limited to imagining. If something is unimaginable, it does not follow that it is also inconceivable; and further, to say that *x* is inconceivable means that the principles of being are violated by the presence of contradiction.

The relevance of this first assumption for a proponent of the ontological argument cannot be underestimated. To reason from concept to necessary being, for him, does not mean from concept to empirical (contingent) fact, not from empirical fact to concept, nor from empirical fact to necessary being. Rather, to reason from concept to necessary being specifically means that the possibility of a being which necessar-

1. For a complete listing, see T.L. Miethé, "The Ontological Argument: A research bibliography," *The Modern Schoolman* 54 (1977) 148–66.

2. See P.J.W. Miller, "The Ontological Argument for God", *The Personalist* 42 (Summer 1961) 337–38.

3. Passages from Anselm and Gaunilo are taken from *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S.N. Deane, introduction by C. Hartshorne, 2d ed. (La Salle, Ill., 1962) and will be referred by title and chapter, e.g. *Proslogion* 2.

4. For an expanded discussion, see F. Ferré, *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion* (New York, 1967), pp. 126–45.

ily exists cannot be based upon empirical premises, and neither can it be demanded that empirical evidence is required to deduce that God does or does not exist.⁵

As to the second assumption, it can be said that the logical order of ideas is the domain of the rationalist. He is not concerned about 'when' the ideas occur in the temporal order, but rather, 'where' they are located and correctly arranged in the system. Knowledge, for the rationalist, is basically dependent upon the reorganization of our thoughts which surface in a random and adventitious temporal way. This 'chaos' finds its justification in a necessary logical order. The mind proceeds to dissect reality's real from apparent structures in a total system of metaphysical order.

The second assumption also is important for a proponent of the ontological argument. He must validly derive the existence of God from the logical necessities of the concept of God.

These two assumptions serve as presuppositions to any ontological argumentation. The priority of conception over perception leads to an acknowledgment that thought can know reality as it is. Unlike faith whose object is known only extrinsically (*ab alio*), reason knows its object directly (*ab illo*). The object or reason is known, as Miller explains, "through its own essence, *ab illo*, that is, through the principles in the thing which make it to be what it is."⁶

The primacy of logical order, if it be relevant for recognizing the 'essentialist' element in ontological argumentation, must lead to the further claim that there is a correlation of thought to reality. If Anselm's formulation is to be identified with the realist tradition, it must assume that the criteria of thought have no necessity of their own, but mirror a coherent order in identity with reality. For a realist, the logical structure will be found on the side of reality, not of thought. The conceptual order will be the a priori structure of reality; the perceptual order will rank second; consequently, ontological primacy will be understood over perception. Anselm, indeed, proceeds in this 'essentialist' direction where, as Hanks explains, "logical validity entails ontological commitment."⁷

Once a rationalist assumes that reality is in fact a coherent system, he can conclude that reality is not incoherent, nor arbitrary, and consequently, there

can be no 'irrational' explanation. For a proponent of the ontological argument, as Gilkey states, this means that he "can only conclude that God is *if* it be agreed that it is insupportable for a given significant aspect of known reality to lack an explanation."⁸

With these presuppositions in mind, what precisely does an ontological argument propose to prove? The argument claims two things: that the idea of God does not involve a contradiction; and that existence is a perfection, and 'actual existence' is a defining characteristic.

Concerning the first claim, a proponent of the ontological argument assumes two premises: that the idea of God is thinkable, and that it has a defining content which is consistent and self-evident.⁹ It would be absurd to say that just because the idea of God is thinkable, my thinking legislates God into existence. This claim is not made by the rationalist, and, surely, not claimed by Anselm either. Rather, as Descartes indicates, "the necessity which lies in the thing itself, that is, the necessity of the existence of God, determines me to think in this way."¹⁰ To be self-evident, then, means not dependent on any existential premises.

As to the second claim, a supporter holds that the nonexistence of perfection cannot be thought because this would be self-contradictory. The contradiction would entail that the proposition 'God exists' is not a logically necessary proposition. In other words, the ontological proof claims to find a contradiction in God not existing. The subtlety lies, according to Hopkins, when in "reflecting upon the description of God, one is supposedly led to discern that God exists (=the fact of existing) and that He exists so really that He cannot even be thought not to exist (= the manner of existing)."¹¹

II. What Does Anselm's Ontological Argument Say?

There are two proofs in Anselm's account: one found in *Proslogion* 2, and the other in *Proslogion*

8. L. Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The renewal of God-language* (Indianapolis, 1969), p. 212.

9. For Anselm, self-evident means that the premises which are derived from 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' are clear. In other words, the argument presupposes nothing beyond the signification of its terms. Still, the existence of God needs to be argued and proved. "It might be argued that only after we have gone through St. Anselm's proof do we see then, as a result of the proof, that God cannot be thought not to exist" (M. J. Charlesworth, *St. Anselm's 'Proslogion' with 'A Reply on Behalf of the Fool' by Gaunilo and 'The Author's Reply to Gaunilo'* (Oxford, 1965), p. 95.

10. *Meditations On First Philosophy* 5 in *The Meditations and Selections from the Principles of René Descartes*, trans. John Veitch (La Salle, Ill., 1937), repr. in *Philosophers Speak for Themselves: From Descartes to Locke*, ed. T.V. Smith and M. Greene (Chicago, 1940), p. 94.

11. J. Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm* (Minneapolis, 1972), p. 62.

5. See D. Hanks, "Some Problems in Ontological Argumentation," *The Iliff Review* 29 (Spring 1972; repr. 1972) 8. Hanks's main objection to J.N. Findlay's "Can God's Existence Be Disproved?" *Mind* 57 (April 1948), repr. in A. Plantinga, ed., *The Ontological Argument: From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers*, introduction by R. Taylor (Garden City, N.Y., 1965), pp. 111-22, is directed against Findlay's claim that the theist can only claim his conviction that 'God necessarily exists' by ignoring 'empirical circumstances', and therefore, "Findlay is not justified in concluding that, since God is not perceivable by the senses, He therefore cannot exist" (Hanks, p. 88).

6. Miller, p. 338.

7. Hanks, p. 3.

3 and *Reply to Gaunilo*. Both proofs begin with the same major premise: that God is 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'. Whereas the minor premise in *Proslogion 2* emphasizes 'what exists in reality is greater than what exists in the mind alone', the focus of the minor premise in *Proslogion 3* is on 'what cannot be conceived not to exist is greater than what can be conceived to exist'. Charlesworth translates this to mean 'what exists necessarily is greater than what exists contingently'.¹²

Proslogion 2 concludes that existence is both actual and possible. On the basis of this conclusion, *Proslogion 3* deals only with actual existence which can be contingent or necessary. Considered logically independent of *Proslogion 2* according to Hartshorne, Malcolm, and Charlesworth, the minor premise of *Proslogion 3* assumes that 'necessary existence' is meaningful. 'God exists' is a logically necessary proposition, whereas 'God does not exist' is logically self-contradictory. *Proslogion 3* concludes that God exists 'actually' and 'necessarily'. To establish 'actual existence' for God, Anselm needs the move of 'necessarily exists'.

The focus is different in both proofs, but both discuss a common subject in a common world of being. The world of being in *Proslogion 2* is divided into things which 'really or actually' exist and things which only 'conceptually' exist. It is on this basis that Anselm deduces existence as a perfection. The world of being in *Proslogion 3* and *Reply 1* is seen in the perspective of necessary, contingent, and impossible existents. The real choices which establish that 'God necessarily exists' are 'necessary' and 'impossible'.

The structure of each argument may be summarized by looking first at *Proslogion 2*. Mann has suggested that the proof consists of two sub-arguments.¹³ The first sub-argument establishes the existence of 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' in the understanding (*in intellectus*), whereas the second proves the existence of 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' in a real object (*in re*). The second sub-argument can be identified as a *reductio ad impossibile* demonstration founded upon the impossibility of a contradictory supposition: "Suppose it [that than which nothing greater can be conceived] exists in the understanding alone" (*Proslogion 2*).

The axioms of each sub-argument are characteristically different too. The first reads: "Whatever is understood, exists in the understanding"; the second, reads: "Suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater." Of all the recent attempts to reconstruct the *Proslogion 2* argument, Mann's effort is most faithful to Anselm's formulation:

- (1) Whatever is understood is in the understanding. (2) If that than which nothing greater

can be conceived is understood, then that than which nothing greater can be conceived is in the understanding. (Instance of (1)) But: (3) That than which nothing greater can be conceived is understood. Thus: (4) That than which nothing greater can be conceived is in the understanding. (From (2) and (3)) Suppose: (5) That than which nothing greater can be conceived is in the understanding only, and does not exist in reality. (6) For whatever is in the understanding only, and does not exist in reality, something greater than it can be conceived. (7) If that than which nothing greater can be conceived is in the understanding only, and does not exist in reality, then something greater than that than which nothing greater can be conceived can be conceived. (Instance of (6)) Thus: (8) Something greater than that than which nothing greater can be conceived can be conceived. (From (5) and (7)) Thus: (9) That than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in reality. (From (4), (5), and (8)).¹⁴

Proslogion 3 is a further statement concerning how real God is. In *Proslogion 2*, as noted, a thing which exists in reality is 'greater' than if it exists merely in the understanding. In *Proslogion 3*, necessary existence is a perfection because perfection means the real impossibility of nonexistence.

The structure of *Proslogion 3* is the following: (1) a being whose nonexistence is really impossible is 'greater' than a being whose nonexistence is really possible. (2) A being greater than that which cannot be conceived must be one whose nonexistence is really impossible. (3) That being is God 'that than which a greater cannot be conceived'.¹⁵

In *Reply 1*, Anselm gives a justification for the axiom 'to exist necessarily is greater than to exist contingently'. Necessity is defined as being eternal, viz. having no beginning, and as being non-composite. By the end of *Reply 1*, Anselm has established a pair of formal connections. The first pair is between 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' and 'that which cannot be conceived except as without beginning'; and between 'that which does not have a beginning' with 'that which cannot be conceived not to exist'. The second pair is between 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' and 'that which cannot be a spatio-temporal being nor a subject of composite parts'; and between 'that which exists as a whole everywhere and always' with 'that which cannot be conceived not to exist'. To reiterate, Anselm equates necessity, which is defined in terms of non-

the Ontological Argument," *The Review of Metaphysics* 26 (December 1972) 260-77.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

15. I have substituted 'really' for 'logically' in N. Malcolm's account. See "Anselm's Ontological Arguments", *The Philosophical Review* 69 (1960), repr. in Plantinga, p. 141.

12. Charlesworth, p. 74.

13. W. E. Mann, "The Ontological Presuppositions of

spatio-temporality or non-compositeness, with necessity which is defined in real terms as 'not being able to be understood in the mind as not existing'.¹⁶

III. *The Issues of the Ontological Argument*

The argument has been characterized by Plantinga as offering "an enormous return on a pretty slim investment—a definition, and a perplexing but not altogether implausible premise connecting existence and 'greatness', yield the theistic conclusion."¹⁷ On first examination, it is hard to tell what, if anything, is fallacious about the argument. It has been suggested that some of the premises, viz. the distinction between existence *in intellectu* and existence *in re*, the distinction between one's conceiving of a thing (*cogitare*) and one's conceiving it to exist (*intelligere*), and the doctrine that existence is an added perfection, taken singly are defensible, but when considered together "still yield no convincing proof for the existence of God."¹⁸ A disentanglement of these issues which each proof raises in light of Guanilo's and Kant's critique is in order.

The principal contention for the critics of *Proslogion 2* is the status of 'existence'. The objection considered fatal to the ontological argument is that existence is not a predicate. In other words, *Proslogion 2* has been seen as vulnerable to the Kantian criticism which asserts that we are unable to deduce real existence from a mere concept. It is because of Kant's attack that Malcolm and others have rejected the validity of *Proslogion 2* "because it rests on the false doctrine that existence is a perfection (and therefore that 'existence' is a 'real predicate')".¹⁹ But is Anselm's proof so untenable? Is Kant's criticism relevant to what Anselm wants to prove?

Kant's position maintains that we must not be misled by the fact that 'existence' shares the same grammatical form as true predicates, and thus, say that 'exists' is a property of something. To say that 'x exists' does not mean adding one more defining characteristic to a thing. For Kant, 'x exists' only means to acknowledge that a thing with all its attributes is an actual existent, rather than a possible or fictitious thing.

Kant's celebrated comparison of one hundred actual thalers and one hundred conceived thalers underscores the claim that the *real* difference between actuality and possibility does not lie in the list of characteristics, which are the same in each case. If existence added anything to things, then the possible could become actual by being changed with the annexation of something new. Consequently, as Kant

states, "my concept would not, in that case, express the whole object, and would not therefore be an adequate concept of it" (*Critique* B627). Also, "we could not, therefore, say that the exact object of my concept exists" (*Critique* B628).²⁰ By regarding the function of asserting existence as not identical with the function of attributing qualities to things,²¹ Kant maintains that an entailment between perfection and existence is illusory. If existence, then, is no quality at all, it is a misunderstanding to suppose, as an Anselmian, that nonexistence could be an imperfection.

The basis of Kant's criticism that existence is not a real predicate centers on the claim that "the real contains no more than the merely possible" (*Critique* B627). A defender of Anselm must base his response on the fact that the concept 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' has real content, namely, that it is meaningful. Kant's criticism would be valid if Anselm has started out with some concept that refers to a contingent instance and then added a genuine predicate (existence) to it. But the Anselmian starting-point is the concept of God which we have in our minds; on the basis of that concept, is the affirmation of God's real existence. It is arguable whether Anselm is talking about existence as a predicate at all, in the sense that the concept 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' must necessarily add the concept of existence. The mind conceives, according to Anselm, an essence which is independent of all existential conditions.

Let us examine the meaning-content of the concept 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' more closely. 'Greater' is not used quantitatively, rather it means 'more perfect', viz. a 'higher degree' of existence: "To thee [God] alone, therefore, it belongs to exist more truly than all other beings, and hence in a higher degree than all others" (*Pros-*

20. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N.K. Smith (New York, 1929; rev. ed. 1965). Pagination follows the 2d ed. of the *Critique* (1787). To be sure, there are problems in this Kantian example, specifically on the side of the conceptual structure, which cannot be discussed here. For example, what criteria should be used for distinguishing thalers conceived in a waking state with those imagined in a dream, or in a hallucinatory state?

21. This has been further developed by G.E. Moore in "Is Existence a Predicate," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 15, suppl. (1936), repr. in Plantinga, *Ontological Argument*, p. 81, where he holds, in contrast to Russell, the more radical position that existence is neither a 'property' of an individual, nor of a propositional function, but rather, 'x exists' is no proposition at all. By contrasting 'exists' in sentences such as 'some tame tigers exist' and 'some tame tigers growl', and "saying that 'exist', in this usage, does not 'stand for an attribute', whereas growl does", Moore goes beyond Kant when he suggests that the only meaningful sense of 'x exists' is when one points to a thing and says 'x exists'. In this respect, 'exists' is taken in any proposition to mean another 'sense-datum' of a physical object. 'X exists' is significant as it is when pointing and saying 'this is a book', or 'this is red', where 'is a book' and 'red' "stand for attributes... part but not the whole of what is asserted by any 'value' of 'x is a book', 'x is red'" (ibid., pp. 83-84).

16. See Charlesworth, p. 91, n. 1.

17. A. Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A study of the rational justification of belief in God* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1967), pp. 26-27.

18. Mann, p. 277.

19. Malcolm, p. 140.

logion 3). It is within the framework of metaphysical perfections that it makes sense to say that a horse is 'more perfect' than a tree, and a man has a 'higher degree' of existence than a horse. The term 'conceive' means that it is logically thinkable or possible.

Does Kant's example, then, apply here? Anselm would not deny that there is a difference between one hundred thalers conceived in the mind and one hundred thalers actually existing. 'Possible existence' is not a type or kind of existence, but a relation to existence, and one certainly can make a comparison. Concerning the notion of God though, one is not making the same kind of comparison. In the case of contingent things, a comparison does not imply that one hundred conceived thalers are 'less', meaning 'less perfect', than one hundred actual thalers.

'Greater' in this one unique case, 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived', must be viewed in the absolute sense, namely, perfection. Indeed, the major claim of a defender of the ontological argument is that we can conceive perfection, independent of whether *x* actually exists or not. Kant's objection gains relevance only if we claim that perfection is inconceivable, which Anselm does not hold.

The point of debate comes when Anselm defines the status of perfection. God is conceivable and self-existent, i.e., incapable of nonexistence. The claim is that God is existent and such that his nonexistence is impossible. As Miller states, "existence is in some way the ultimate or final sort of greatness. The concept in the mind cannot possess that which makes a thing to be the greatest of all possible things, i.e., real existence".²² In the unique case of God, one makes that 'ontological commitment' whereby God must 'actually' exist because it is in his nature to possess ultimate perfection.

Kant's criticism, then, bypasses Anselm's objective. If the logic of 'exists' concerns itself only with logical form alone, viz. the formal relations among propositions, that investigation must be subordinated to Anselm's purpose. Anselm's essentialist logic entails the ontological existence of an entity which seems to be logically required by the meaning of each of its terms in the notion 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'. There is no requirement which would require us first to admit that something actually is perfect in order to establish that there is a logical implication between perfection and existence. So long as the meaning of the terms are understood, that is all that is required for the proof.

'Existence' does not have an independent story to tell either. Perfection means 'fullness of being' or 'fullness of essence' which implies to be 'actual' most perfectly. The starting-point is a thing's essence which is grasped intelligibly in our concept of that thing.

Miller explains:

In the case of that being than which no greater can be conceived, this essence, to which no reality can be refused, itself determines the way in which it shall be. It can only be in the greatest way, that is, really, outside the mind, subsisting eternally in itself. In this philosophy, to conceive God is already to attain the very being itself of God in the concept, since the intelligible reality of the greatest essence includes its own mode of being, which is real existence.²³

The meaning of the concept 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' is critically challenged by Gaunilo in his reply *In Behalf of the Fool*. Gaunilo understands Anselm's argument as claiming that if 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' is in the mind, it must also be postulated to exist in reality too. Gaunilo does not question that we do in fact have concepts. His main concern, rather, is to challenge the sense in which 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' is in the mind.

Holding that we can conceive of unreal objects, i.e. false things, which have no corresponding extramental objects, Gaunilo misapplies this observation to God. Even in the case of God, no inference from existence *in intellectu* to existence *in re* can be made, as Anselm would have us believe. Anselm would agree with Gaunilo's observation concerning unreal objects, but this would have no bearing on Anselm's claim that the concept 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' is meaningful, and from that fact affirm that it is also true or instantiated.

While both Gaunilo and Anselm consider a concept meaningful even if it is not instantiated, they part company in the case of God. Gaunilo distinguishes between 'being conceived' (*cogitare*) in the mind which is directed to no real object, and 'being understood' (*intelligere*) which refers to some actually existing object. This distinction, according to Gaunilo, must be made clear if the claim 'God could be conceived not actually to exist' is to make any sense. As Anselm's position stands, the concept-object distinction collapses.²⁴ Gaunilo's point is to force Anselm to make this distinction between a concept existing in the mind and something existing in actual reality. To do this, Anselm must acknowledge that the notion 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived',

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 348-49.

24. There is a fuzzy attempt on Anselm's part not to make any special distinction between *cogitare* and *intelligere* in the case of God: "That than which a greater cannot be conceived is truly understood and conceived, and is in the understanding and in concept" (*Reply 1*). In *Proslogion 4*, though, he does use *intelligere* to represent the stronger form of *cogitare*. Correct conceiving is to understand that 'x exists': "Therefore, he who understands that God so exists, cannot conceive that he does not."

22. Miller, p. 345.

if it is *understood in intellectu*, can be inferred to exist also *in re*.

According to Gaunilo, then, it is not enough for something 'to be conceived'; it has 'to be understood'. 'That than which nothing greater can be conceived' is indefinite because it is directed to no real object, and therefore, an inference for 'existence' cannot be made. It is not analogous to the plan of the artist, which also is *in intellectu* as a concept, but which is an idea *really* existing in the mind as an act of thought known by the soul directly.

Gaunilo's criticism here must be seen in light of what he wants to emphasize. In the case of 'God exists', we need a stronger sense of 'thinking' than when we think of God's nonexistence or my nonexistence. The propositions 'I can think of God as not existing' or 'I can think of myself as not existing' are not self-contradictory, according to Gaunilo. Anselm's claim that God 'cannot be conceived not to be' must be revised to 'cannot be understood not to be'. This revision would entail the stronger sense of *intelligere* as connoting the existence of its object.²⁵

As a result, Gaunilo makes his first claim: the concept of God is meaningless because God is unknowable to us in this life. The claim, as seen above, has been established by comparing the case of God with 'unreal objects' which have no reference to objects *in re* corresponding to what is conceived, and by distinguishing the concept of God from the plan of the artist.

Gaunilo makes a second claim: not only do we not know what is signified by 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived', but we cannot infer in anyway the actual existence of what is signified outside of the mind. To emphasize this point, Gaunilo distinguishes three types of *intelligere*: first, we can understand the words of the formula; second, we understand the words as meaning something; and third, we understand the words as meaning something that actually exists (*In Behalf of the Fool* 4). The concept 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' is understood only in the trivial sense of the first type:

It is conceived as by a man who does not know the object, and conceives of it only in accordance with the movement of his mind produced by hearing the word, the mind attempting to image for itself the signification of the word that is heard. And it would be surprising if in the reality of fact it could ever attain to this (*In Behalf of the Fool* 4).

The third type of *intelligere* is inapplicable for the concept of God because, for Gaunilo, there remains an unbridgeable distinction between existence in the mind and actual instantiation. The question of instan-

tiation requires a separate proof (an empirical one), but not a proof arguing from the concept of something. Gaunilo rehabilitates Anselm's argument: "For it should be proven first that this being itself really exists somewhere; and then, from the fact that it is greater than all, we shall not hesitate to infer that it also subsists in itself" (*In Behalf of the Fool* 5).²⁶

A defender of Anselm would not object to Gaunilo's effort to map the various uses of 'conceiving of' something. The point of contention comes when Gaunilo claims that God's actual existence must be proven before he can be conceived as a necessary being. To prove that God exists in actuality prior to understanding his existence as 'greater than which nothing can be conceived' would be superfluous for an Anselmian, because the defining content of the concept of God already is self-evident (i.e. the premises are clear).

A more serious objection against Gaunilo could be brought forth concerning an identification between 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' and 'a being greater than all others' (*In Behalf of the Fool* 7). According to Anselm, "the real existence of a being which is said to be 'greater than all other beings' cannot be demonstrated in the same way with the real existence of one that is said to be 'a being than which a greater cannot be conceived'" (*Reply* 5).

To accept Gaunilo's empirical premise forces us to make a contradiction from the first move. If we say that it did not actually exist, it would be contradictory to claim that there is 'a being greater than all others'. For an Anselmian, 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' is defined precisely as 'that which cannot be conceived as not existing', namely, it actually exists; whereas to hold that it does not exist, whether actually, possibly, or thought of, is self-contradictory.

As to Gaunilo's lost island example (*In Behalf of the Fool* 6), such a conceptual scheme cannot be applied to God's case. Gaunilo confuses two separate realms of being: contingent existents and a unique necessary existent. Anselm agrees that contingent things exist, but they still can be thought of as not existing without contradiction. The principle of non-contradiction, taken seriously by Anselm, applies here too, because "an object cannot be at once conceived and not conceived" (*Reply* 9). If this is a minimal condition which applies to contingent existents, it also applies to God. However, in addition to this principle, what applies only to God is that 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' cannot even be conceived not to exist. 'God exists' is a logically necessary proposition, since what distin-

26. See also the conclusion of the lost island example: "For he ought to show first that the hypothetical excellence of this island exists as a real and indubitable fact, and in no wise as any unreal object, or one whose existence is uncertain, in my understanding" (*In Behalf of the Fool* 6).

25. Cf. Charlesworth, pp. 88-89.

guishes God's existence from the existence of His creatures is precisely the inconceivability of His non-existence. The possibility of denying that God actually exists is admitted by Anselm, but the denial really exhibits no comprehension of what the formula means.

He who conceives of a being than which a greater is inconceivable, does not conceive of that whose non-existence is possible, but of that whose non-existence is impossible. Therefore, what he conceives of must exist; for anything whose non-existence is possible, is not that of which he conceives (*Reply* 9).

Is Gaunilo's conclusion that we do not have a concept of God, based upon his two claims, then, a devastating refutation of Anselm? Both Anselm and Gaunilo seem to be on independent paths which never quite meet, but only parallel. Anselm insists that the fool cannot fail but to understand rationally that existence is logically entailed by the description of 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived', provided that he only understands the description of the concept. Gaunilo, on the other hand, questions that kind of description as invalid. Whereas, for Anselm, God's existence is necessary, and therefore, non-existence for 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' is impossible, for Gaunilo, God's existence is impossible because 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' may not actually exist.

The emphasis, then, is diametrically opposite between Anselm and Gaunilo. The fool is not saying: 'If God exists (and it is possible that He does not), then He necessarily exists' (indicative conditional); rather, the very different statement that 'if God were to exist (but He does not) then He would necessarily exist' (a contrary to fact conditional).²⁷ The Anselmian discovery, on the other hand, is to take the concept of God and to recognize that its descriptive content logically entails that God's nonexistence is impossible. The objections neither of Kant nor of Gaunilo really seem to refute the heart of the ontological argument, namely, 'the inconceivability of God's not existing'.

The main issue for the critics of *Proslogion* 3 is the inference to necessary existence, viz. existence of something which cannot be thought not to exist. Kant's criticism of the intelligibility of 'absolute necessity' does not address the problem which Anselm is concerned with, namely, to establish 'God as necessary being'. For Kant, necessity is defined within the given totality of phenomenal experience. God (actual being) is supposed to be above and beyond all categorical conditions: "The concept of necessity is only to be found in our reason, as a formal condition of thought; it does not allow of being hypostatized as a material condition of existence"

27. See Hopkins, p. 84.

(*Critique* B648). Ferré suggests that a defender of the ontological argument might reply that the 'unconditional actuality of God' "is properly to be understood as a way of expressing his *lack of limitation* or perfection as *ens realissimum*. Thus the 'unconditioned' character of God is precisely the condition of his necessary existence".²⁸

When Kant maintains that God is an ideal of reason, that is only to say that it is a regulative principle of reason.²⁹ This observation cannot be expected to disclaim the ontological argument. 'Absolute necessity', for Kant, means only 'conditional necessity', and this is a shift away from Anselm's position. Even if 'existence' is translated to 'necessary existence', Kant's main tenet remains unaltered; namely, the modes of thought also condition things, a priori.

If all necessity is reducible to logical necessity, this means that Kant's necessity of thought conditions the necessity of things, a priori. Whereas it is not contradictory to deny existential propositions as synthetic, it is self-contradictory, according to Kant, to claim a necessary existent. The emphasis lies not in whether there is a logically necessary being, but whether the proposition 'God exists' is a logically necessary truth.

With necessity so defined, Kant would say that the defender of the ontological argument makes the mistake of forcing the claim that 'God, the subject, necessarily has application to something' from the different issue of accepting the conditional 'if anything is God, then that being will have necessary existence' to be a necessary proposition. For Kant, then, the concept of God remains no more than the possibility of God. Modern critics of the ontological argument have expanded on this to conclude that the concept of God operates in much the same logical way as the concept of 'unicorn'. Both are without contradiction, and therefore, their logical possibility can be deduced.

The question remains whether Kant's criticism is fatal to Anselm's *Proslogion* 3 argument for God's necessity. Malcolm attempts to defend Anselm by seeking to refute Kant's claim that God's logical

28. Ferré, p. 201.

29. "The ideal of the supreme being is nothing but a *regulative principle* of reason, which directs us to look upon all connection in the world as if it originated from an all-sufficient necessary cause" (*Critique* B647). Charlesworth suggests that the ontological argument is workable if some kind of causal or 'cosmological' argument is introduced. This would perhaps unpack Anselm's claim that 'necessary existence' has meaning a priori by forcing us "to postulate that the terms 'necessary' and 'existent' may be conjoined and that the notion of 'necessary existent' is meaningful, though we do not know *how* the terms 'necessary' and 'existent' are conjoinable (as we do, for instance, with 'triangle' and 'figure containing two right angles') nor *how* the notion of 'necessary existent' is meaningful" (idid., pp. 76-77). Obviously, as Charlesworth admits too, Anselm refuses to introduce any cosmological explanation as a presupposition to his formulation.

necessity is translatable into a conditional necessity.³⁰ He accuses Kant of really meaning that it is possible that God does not exist. To accept the contrary to fact conditional, as seen in Gaunilo's formulation, 'if God exists (and it is possible that He does not)' and the claim 'God necessarily exists' is self-contradictory. 'God necessarily exists' does not entail such a conditional. They are incompatible propositions.

Malcolm correctly defends Anselm by emphasizing that God's necessary being means independent existence.³¹ This means that contingent existence and contingent non existence do not apply to God. This has been proven in *Proslogion* 2. Now in *Proslogion* 3, Anselm concludes that there is no such thing as dependence in God. A defender of Anselm would reply to Kant that the ontological argument, as Ferré states, "rules out any conditions *external* to the subject which could necessitate God, who is supposed to be dependent upon nothing besides himself."³² Indeed, a theist would reply that God needs more than possibility. The status of 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' needs to be decided on the level of actuality. Whereas if one only sees the matter under logical necessity, he will not address himself to what Anselm claims: ontological necessity.

What Anselm is concerned in *Proslogion* 3 is to establish that the concept of God entails 'a factually or ontologically necessary being'. In this sense, neither Malcolm nor Hartshorne defines what Anselm wants to maintain. Both fail because they equivocate factual (ontological) necessity and logical necessity. In Hartshorne, for example, Anselm is exclusively understood in terms of logical necessity.³³ The point that needs to be made is that the empiricist doctrine, which holds that logical necessity is ultimately tautological, bypasses completely the claim that in the case of God we are dealing with a necessary being which is *a se esse*.³⁴

As a result, a defender of Anselm will respond that ontological necessity does not imply either a logically necessary being or a being belief in whose existence is necessary within a contingent framework.

30. See Malcolm, pp. 154–56.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 143–44.

32. Ferré, p. 203.

33. J. Hick, *Arguments for the Existence of God* (New York, 1971), pp. 96–97. Hick proposes that Hartshorne's first premise be regarded as not logically necessary, but ontologically necessary. Propositions 6–10 can be seen in terms of logical necessity.

34. Mann makes the same criticism as Hick concerning the attempts of modal logic to rehabilitate the ontological argument. The apparatus of modal logic, namely, its operators of necessity and possibility, apply to propositions only. Whereas Anselm talks about beings or things, modal logic applies necessity, possibility, and impossibility only to states of affairs. Fitting Anselm's argument into modal logic requires us "(a) to shift from talk of conceivable beings, etc., to logically possible states of affairs, etc., and (b) to obliterate the crucial distinction between conceiving and conceiving to exist...but the fact remains that they are changes, and hence not faithful to Anselm's thought" (Mann, p. 268).

Hick offers such an example of necessity: "Within the setting of Christian thought it is necessary to believe that God exists; and it is necessary in the sense that one who does not so believe is, by definition, not operating within the Christian thought-world."³⁵

The latter point, that ontological necessity does not imply verification in a contingent framework, is established in both *Reply* 1 and 2. In *Reply* 1, two contentions, that the idea of God is the idea of a contingent being, and that God so defined does not exist, are proven false by Anselm. In *Reply* 2, what is proven is that 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' does not fall in the class of things which do not exist but could possibly exist. The claims of *Reply* 1 and 2 prove, then, that ontological necessity only means that God is not contingently nonexistent. Furthermore, this conclusion is arrived at without implying that God's existence is necessarily dependent upon a certain conceptual framework.

The former point, that ontological necessity does not imply logical necessity, can be established by an Anselmian as follows. God must be unique, and he is unique because his peculiar characteristic is 'not being able to be thought not to exist'. He is above the multiplicity of contingent beings which are merely physically necessary, which means that God is 'not possible to be thought not to be'. In other words, God is greater than 'that which is possible to be thought not to be', namely, contingent beings. Anselm's ontological necessity is on a higher level than even some of Aquinas' 'necessary beings', which consist of heavenly bodies and eternal things. These while 'not possible not to be', can nevertheless be thought not to be.

There are two assumptions, then, that must be accepted if 'ontological necessity' is to be defended. First, one must accept the possibility of a class of things—in this case a class which is comprised of only one unique member who is eternal, self-existent, and supra spatio-temporal—as perfect in an absolute sense ('that than which nothing greater can be conceived'). Second, one must also accept that contingent things represent a metaphysical limitation or imperfection which is seen in light of their essentiality to God's 'complete and perfect essence'.

An Anselmian, finally, might respond that an analysis of the logical necessity of analytic propositions does not decide either way whether 'necessary existence' is meaningful or not. What decides it, is that the concept 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' is self-evidently understood. Anselm might respond to Kant that his criticism proves too much: namely, to claim that it is logically necessary that *all* existential statements are synthetic, and from that to conclude that 'God exists' is not a logically necessary proposition.³⁶ Anselm would not object to

35. Hick, p. 86.

36. Cf. Charlesworth, p. 75.

accepting that the existence of things in our experience is contingent, and therefore, existential statements concerning this kind of being are synthetic. But there is at least one existential proposition, namely, 'God exists', which Anselm claims to have an argument for its necessity. The unsatisfactory answer which Hartshorne, Malcolm, and Findlay have offered is that the concept of God makes sense only if it exists neither in thought nor in reality. As a result, Hartshorne shifts the issue of the denial of God's factual existence from a necessary question to a contingent one.³⁷ This, of course, was not what Anselm claimed to have discovered.

IV. The Relevance of the Ontological Argument

Gilkey poses three questions to be asked about any proof of God. The first question asks about the logical meaning of a proof, "the purely philosophical possibility and competence of a proof of God" The second raises the issue of the religious relevance of the proof, regardless of its logical validity or non-validity. The third asks whether the proof can relate to our actual lived experience in the world.³⁸ These three questions will be the foci of my concluding remarks concerning the ontological argument for the existence of God.

Admittedly, this paper has concentrated on the first question by attending to the philosophical competence of Anselm's proof. As any other ontological argumentation, the proof supposes a rationalist's theory of knowledge and a realist's ontology. Furthermore, the argument, as Anselm states, "would require no other for its proof than itself alone" (*Proslogion*, preface). In other words, it presupposes nothing beyond the signification of its terms.

What Anselm wants us to discover by such an argument is that it makes sense to hold that at least one existential proposition 'God exists' is necessary. The real burden of proof lies in *Proslogion* 2. By showing the necessity between the subject-predicate terms in 'God exists',³⁹ Anselm has established the intelligible signification of the terms, and from that has understood that 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' exists *in intellectu* and *in re*. A

37. See C. Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery: A re-examination of the ontological proof for God's existence* (La Salle, Ill., 1965), pp. 53 et seq.

38. Gilkey, pp. 207-10.

39. This is similar to Aristotle's *necessitas consequentiae*, e.g. 'for all p, if p then p' where necessity is attributable to logical consequences within the proposition itself. D.P. Henry in *The Logic of Saint Anselm* (Oxford, 1967) attributes two senses of consequent necessity to Anselm: *necessitas consequentiae* and *necessitas consequentis*, where the necessity lies only in the consequent of a conditional proposition, e.g. 'if the sun moves then it moves necessarily' (pp. 179-80). Consequent necessity (both kinds) is what Anselm considers important to the ontological argument. Furthermore, it does not entail any other kind of necessity (physical, simple, antecedent).

subsequent step has been taken in *Proslogion* 3 concerning the 'absolute necessity' of 'God exists'.

The problem of the logical independence of the two proofs, however, has not been solved. Barth suggests that Anselm is really offering a single argument divided into two phases. In *Proslogion* 2, God's 'general existence' is demonstrated, namely, that God exists in the same way as other things exist. The same reasoning is taken at a deeper level in *Proslogion* 3. What is proven is God's 'special existence', namely, not that he merely exists, but is a self-existent (necessary) reality.⁴⁰ Schufreider follows the line of D.P. Henry, R. La Croix, and others, by also proposing that there is one single argument for the existence of God:

So Chapters I and II go together and serve to show a series of existential deductions about the being 'minimally characterized' as a being than which a greater cannot be thought, and the rest of the work serves to demonstrate that this 'minimally characterized' being is God. In this way, one would not be justified in claiming that *God* exists after the reasoning of II, nor that *God* cannot be thought to exist after III. Rather, only the entire *Proslogion*, taken as a whole, would serve to justify these claims.⁴¹

If this reading of Anselm is accepted, does this mean that Malcolm's claim that there are two logically independent proofs (where the first is invalid) can also be accepted?⁴² I am suggesting that perhaps *Proslogion* 2 taken by itself is the key demonstration. This is the essential argument which purports to refute the atheist. *Proslogion* 3, to be sure, yields a new line of argumentation, valid on its own right, but perhaps is not so isolated from the first.

The point, though, that needs to be clarified is that the burden of proof must rest with making self-evident the premise 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' exists in *intellectu* and *in re*. Once 'actual existence' is established, then we can easily move to the *Proslogion* 3 proof: to prove the distinctive feature of God, namely, that 'God truly exists' in such a way that He cannot be thought not to exist.

The second question concerning the relevance of the proof entails the following question: 'whom does the argument satisfy'? The argument would not satisfy a hard-core atheist who denies that there is any such subject as God. He cannot even say, 'God does not exist', as Anselm rightly points out. If, moreover, such a proponent would assume that the proposition 'God does not exist' to be logically identical with

40. K. Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm's proof of the existence of God in the context of his theological scheme* (Richmond, Virg., 1960), p. 132.

41. G. Schufreider, "The Identity of Anselm's Argument," *The Modern Schoolman* 54 (May 1977) 348-49.

42. Malcolm, p. 140.

'unicorns do not exist' or 'square circles do not exist', he is denying an actual existence of a possibly existing subject. To such a 'logical atheist' who holds that 'God' as a concept has no meaning, because what counts as meaningful and necessary are only those things within our experience (an empirical premise), there is no hope of contact. Anselm cannot say to him 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' is meaningful and still work within the assumptions of ontological argumentation, as long as the atheist cannot concede to the first step, viz. what he considers impossible may necessarily exist.

The point of contact comes with a 'factual atheist' who maintains that God is meaningful, but not instantiated. Here the burden of proof, for Anselm, lies in showing that the concept of God is not self-contradictory, and what is entailed by the concept is independent of any mode of factual existence.

Specifically, as to the proof's 'religious' relevance, Hopkins, in contrast to Barth who holds that the proof does not address itself to one's faith, argues that the common ground between believer and unbeliever is the agreement that reason is not irrelevant to faith. The *Proslogion* proof is "an attempt to find in natural reason a point of contact with the sceptic."⁴³ I agree that the point is missed if we contrast the believer's ability to recognize the soundness of the demonstration with the unbeliever's inability to recognize it based upon their faith or unfaith. The proof rests wholly on rational argumentation and does not presuppose any principles or premises derived from either natural revelation or faith. As a rational proof, then, it does not follow that it has a 'religious' relevance independent of its philosophical relevance. As Miller states, "St. Anselm is not seeking to reinforce belief but to enable us to understand an old truth by demonstrating it in a purely rational way. By 'understanding' Anselm means 'exhibiting the necessity of a truth to reason'".⁴⁴

The third question, whether the proof can relate to our actual lived experience in the world, can be subsumed under the issue of the attractiveness of Anselm's ontological argument. A parallel can be established between Anselm and Husserl's theory of intentionality.⁴⁵ Both attempt to disarm the sceptic. The sceptic's question which asks how can we know that our experiences are veridical, is a demand for the condition of the possibility of knowledge. Gaunilo really is demanding from Anselm to give him the criteria of truth for asserting 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' exists necessarily. The sceptic's

objection is 'how can we know that so and so justification conditions (grounds of belief) really are the justification or truth conditions which will lead us to the truth and not to error'.

Husserl's answer to such an extreme sceptic, who is not sure of anything, is to perform the phenomenological reduction, namely, to turn from real objects to *noemata* with respect to acts of consciousness. What this means for Husserl, and Anselm would agree, is that this or that set of justification conditions are definitionally related to what it *means* to be an object; and that each kind of object prescribes the kind of condition. For example, in ' $2+2=4$ ' and 'he has a smile on his face' the justification conditions are different in each case because of the difference in each object. For both philosophers, the justification conditions are not expressions of external causes. An assertion like 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived', will be justified only when the meaning is filled out.

Some other broad similarities between Anselm and a theory of intentionality can be made. First, both are intent on eventually seeing the essence by comprehending it as the essential structure. The goal is to make explicit that which we are implicitly aware. Second, the emphasis is on describing this experience without imposing any logical constructs upon thought. For Anselm, concepts derive their necessity, or truth, from the being to which they refer. Third, the object of investigation is the intentional object, i.e. the object precisely as we are aware of it. The emphasis is not necessarily on any real determinate object. Fourth, every *cogitare*, like *noesis*, is an act of awareness which leads us to *intelligere*, and this can be compared to a *noema*, viz. a meaning-content of awareness. This *noema* is what is perceived as such, a describable awareness of an object. Fifth, once the standpoint shifts from talking about real objects (reference objects) to meanings (intentional objects), then it makes sense to say that the meaning-content of 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' can have different, and yet not logically contradictory, meanings.

The third question, then, must be answered in the affirmative: 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' necessarily exists is not a mere tautology, but has relatability to our thought experience as a necessary a priori truth. For Anselm, there is a conjunction between thought and experience. In God's case, it is a thought of a certain kind, which is declared by the strongest ontological commitment: the exceptional status of God's existence.

43. Hopkins, p. 61.

44. Miller, p. 338.

45. See E. Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R.B. Gibson (London, 1962).